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THEATRICAL WONDER

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THEATRICAL WONDER

by

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THEATRICAL WONDER

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This dissertation theorizes about a phenomenon of theatrical reception, which I call theatrical wonder. I hypothesize that on certain occasions theatrical spectators experience a sense of awe and an appreciation of possibility, together with deep emotion. This phenomenon results from an impulse to understand a novel theatrical metaphor in a perceptual field that is informed by an empathetic engagement with a character represented theatrically. Moreover, in its apprehension of possibility, theatrical wonder is implicated in utopian thinking. In analyzing a performance of *Mnemonic* by Theatre de Complicite, and in theorizing about my own directorial experiences in professional productions of *Harry's Way* by Keith Huff, *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, and *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, by Edward Albee, I develop an autoethnographic and phenomenological investigation of theatrical wonder.

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Chapter One

Pathways to Wonder

Introduction

There are times, sitting with others in a darkened theatre, when my powers of perception, my very senses are heightened, and I feel myself expanding with a sense of possibility, a sudden alertness to that which is, to that which will – or might – be. I see. I hear. And my seeing and hearing is linked to my breathing – and to my awareness of the breath that charges me. Inhale. Oxygen bubbles ride my bloodstream to a synaptic fireworks display. Colors are more vivid, vibrating. Emotions seem full and fleshy. Vision is a paradoxical portal – broadening the field before me while refining the focus at the center in the darkness. My skin is alive, bristling, prepared. My fingers flex. I hear the insistent murmurs of coded communications, full of nuance and the pleasures of subtlety. I hear the underscoring of ambient sound. Exhale. Astonishment fills the cavities left vacant by air expelled. Associations flash; connections link; juxtapositions jostle for attention and compete for primacy. I am immersed in complex layers of conjured collages, some burning brightly onto a plate of memory, others effervescent, that will resist recall or replication. Neural pathways are bright with activity, and I glide on tiny ripples of rapture. I am on the edge of my seat. I watch and listen and breathe some more. For me, this is the experience of theatrical wonder. And while some of its physical manifestations may be peculiar to me, I believe it is an experience whose fundamental characteristics I share, at least on occasion, with other spectators.

I define theatrical wonder as the experience by a theatrical spectator, during a performance, of a sense of awe and aesthetic appreciation that is coupled with deep feeling and a sense of expanded possibility. It is a phenomenon that, for me at least, happens rarely, but is always accompanied by an acknowledgment that in the experience of it, I have engaged something profound and powerful beyond the confines of its temporal boundary.

What follows is a personal attempt to explore the phenomenon of theatrical wonder: to understand and theorize about the conditions of its experience; to investigate its utility as an instrument of social and political engagement; and to describe the means by which the experience might be made available to spectators of my own work as a theatrical director. My focus on my own experience and my own practice has led me both to a philosophical perspective about the epistemological dimension of my project and a methodology for writing about my thinking and research.

Theatrical wonder is a personal experience, and the process of developing knowledge about it must include an intellectual reckoning of that experience. I have been drawn, almost inexorably, to an intellectual strategy that privileges the primacy of fully embodied experience, to a phenomenological perspective in other words, and I am indebted to the phenomenological probing of theatre scholars like Stanton Garner and Bert O. States. In my analysis of performance, I have been profitably drawn to the phenomenological work of Wilhelm Sauter (who has, in turn, relied heavily on the phenomenological hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer), and I have found it useful to refer to some of the ideas of Paul Ricoeur about interpretation.

I have undertaken my research with a hypothesis: that theatrical wonder involves the perception of theatrical metaphor in an empathetic field, where a spectator experiences both a sense of pleasure in apprehending the metaphor and an emotional identification with a character as performed in a particular moment. Accordingly, my work has led to both a consideration of empathy in theatrical reception and the workings of metaphor. I have relied upon scholarship in diverse fields, especially psychology, neuro-science, anthropology and cognitive linguistics. The largest part of my work, however, has involved a critical scrutiny of my own practice in selected instances, and my practice is, of course, necessarily linked to who I am.

Like most people, my various identity markers represent a welter of description, a chaotic jumble of indicators of age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and political orientation. I am a white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual man of Jewish background, with a decidedly leftist inclination and a stubborn affinity for humanistic values, even given a scholarly immersion in feminist theory and an ardent appreciation of a broadly representative collection of theoretical signposts (decentered, all of them) of our postmodern moment. I am a spouse and a father, a teacher, a critic, and an administrator, a lover of dogs and of food, music, film, and literature. But above all, I am a theatre practitioner.

By any measure, my work in the theatre has been, still is, and will likely continue to be that aspect of my being that consumes the largest portion of my waking (and sometimes sleeping) hours. It has been, and is, the single source of my most profound satisfaction and pleasure. It is a site of passion and

commitment in my life that is rivaled only by my family. I began my sojourn in theatre as a professional actor at the age of eight, and long after my abandonment of acting as a profession and a variety of various vocational detours, I returned to a life as a director, without any formal education in that field, but possessing a considerable accumulation of experiential knowledge.

I began my graduate education in theatre, after a decade or so of experience as a professional director, because I wanted to teach as well as direct, and I needed the validating credential of a graduate degree. While working on my MFA in directing at the University of Iowa, however, I made a discovery that changed the direction of my life. I discovered that the "academic" courses I encountered as part of that program, courses in theatre history and performance theory, had a significant impact on my work as a practitioner, serving as sources of insight and inspiration, suggesting avenues of artistic exploration that I would not have otherwise undertaken. Following my completion of that degree, I continued to work as a director while teaching as an adjunct lecturer at several Midwestern institutions. After several years, I decided that both my teaching and my directing would profit from a more intensive immersion in history, theory and criticism, and I entered the PhD program at the University of Texas at Austin. My goal was, and is, to continue to explore the productive tension between theory and practice both in my work and in my thinking.

My practice is extensive. I have directed approximately eighty shows in the last twenty-two years, and even now, as a full-time tenure-track professor at Cornell College, I average directing four productions each calendar year, both in the academy and in the larger professional world. I do not approach theatre projects simply from the vantage point of an academic seeking a laboratory to work on various theoretical issues, though I think this is a vital and too often neglected aspect of pedagogy. Jill Dolan, writing from a complex identity location as a theatre scholar, a feminist and a queer theorist in *Geographies of Learning*, has made an impassioned and compelling case for the focused merger of theory and practice, asserting that theatre practice is well situated to interrogate assumptions about identity:

> If theater is engaged in deconstructive epistemology, questioning how we know what we think we know, and who we think we are, its representational apparatus can be pressed into service. We can use it in specific contexts to study and play with, for example, performances of sexual identities, to make subcultural codes widely legible, to resist the inculcations of heterosexuality performed as congruent with 'correct' gender acts (83).

I agree, but I observe further that theatre practice constitutes a means of examining the epistemology not only of identity, not only of various issues involving representation, but also a whole complex of issues involving perception

and ontological constructions. That is what I am seeking to explore in the context of wonder.

My approach is not that of a theorist seeking to make concrete various hypothesized or critically derived ideas in a theatrical laboratory. I begin at the opposite end of the spectrum, phenomenologically, from the experience of a practice, which may have been motivated by considerably less analytical and more intuitive forces. Instead of conducting research that initiates analytically, I am engaging a process that begins with experientially inflected intuition and proceeds from there to theoretical discourses that hopefully illuminate the experience that has begun the process. It is a process that necessarily privileges a highly personal dimension of scholarship.

For me, the creation of a production is not only a means of personal artistic expression or textual interpretation; it is a means of posing questions and gesturing toward some tentative answers. It is both a vehicle for investigation and a way of knowing. This restless union of theory and practice was the fact of my professional work long before I discovered a theoretical rubric within which I could think about this in a more disciplined way. That discipline has emerged as performance studies, a discipline that acknowledges different ways of producing knowledge, which "struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice" (Conquergood 145). It is a discipline that involves "another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection"

(146). Conquergood's argument is that the nexus of theory and practice avoids an arbitrary and unnecessarily limiting division of labor between theoreticians and practitioners. It is an argument that I have taken to heart. And it is an argument that parallels in interesting ways one of the most profound intellectual shifts of our time: the dismantling of the Cartesian construct that assumed a division between mind and body and championed an entrenched belief that mental operation is a more reliable mechanism for the generation of useful information than embodied experience. The implications of valuing embodied experience are profound, both for the practitioner and the critic, for the performer and for the spectator. This focus on the experiential dimension of knowing, and on the restless tension between analysis and emotional response, is an inextricable part both of my personal history and of every theatrical project I undertake. It is also one of the means by which I undertake this critical investigation of theatrical wonder.

The still-evolving practice of autoethnography has emerged (largely in the social sciences) as a result of the critiques of traditional methods of qualitative research resulting from the inability of those methods to adequately account for the deficiencies and biases of "objective" observers of cultural or social phenomena (Holt 2). The very notion of a neutral observer or researcher has been thrown into disrepute by an understanding of the extent to which each of us carries the markers and prejudices of our own social and intellectual contexts, and the corollary insight that no single one of those contexts has a justifiable

claim to truth or objectivity. One response has been the emergence of autoethnography, a research technique where the author predicates her/his understanding of a particular cultural phenomenon or discipline upon personal accounts drawn from her/his experiences in that culture or discipline (Reed-Danahay 1997). These texts typically are written in the first person and feature a self-conscious style that may include descriptions of emotional states or reactions, recreations of dialogue, and a variety of literary techniques once thought inappropriate to scholarly research (Ellis & Bochner 2000). The assumption and aspiration of autoethnographic research is that targeted self-study, undertaken with a sufficiently rigorous critical perspective, may yield valuable information and insight about the subject of scrutiny without reliance on a discredited pose of objectivity.

Some critics have objected to what they perceive as a lack of rigor and insufficient relation to empirical data in this methodology (Holt 8). Others have expressed a deep-seated mistrust of the self both as a research vehicle and as an object of study, because they perceive the practice as being prone to self-indulgence and even narcissism (Holt 15). These are certainly concerns that must be considered, but it is important to note that many of the objections to this methodology flow precisely from the historical reliance on “objectivity” the distrust of which has given rise to the very practice now found suspect because of its subjectivity. There is clearly a sense of circularity to the whole argument. In the realm of theatre practice, and its academic companion, performance studies,

however, even the notion of objectivity is vexed, and the potential value of the critical insights of the participant observer has proliferated in the literature[1].

Much of what follows is predicated on my own work as a director in a series of selected projects. And even as I consider work external to myself, in the form of a production by Theatre de Complicite, I am undertaking that consideration through the highly personal lens of my own reception of that work. I am practicing a form of autoethnography, in which "[t]he researcher, in context, interacting with others, becomes the subject of research, thereby blurring distinctions of personal and social, self and other" (Spry 170). In her discussion of writing and performing autoethnography, Tami Spry, referencing both Sidonie Smith and Trinh Minh-ha, goes on to suggest: "Identity exists in a constant flux of interpreting self's interactions with others in sociohistorical contexts. Autoethnography – with its body in the borderlands of autobiography and ethnography – is a narration signifying at least one interpretation of ever-fluctuating identity" (171). I agree that the practice of autoethnography necessarily involves a negotiation of personal identity, but it is important to note that it is also a means of scholarship that builds a bridge from the exquisitely personal and therefore particular to a more generally useful category of information and knowledge. Again, I find the words of Tami Spry especially compelling: "The point of my work is to express scholarship in ways that mirror the passion, pain, and hope of lived experience" (174).

[1] See, for example, Jill Dolan's account of her directing experiences in *Presence and Desire* or any of the performers writing as participant observers in *Voices Made Flesh*, edited by Lynn C. Miller, Jacqueline Taylor and M. Heather Carver.

One theorist in the social sciences has proposed a series of evaluative criteria that might be used in grappling with personal narratives as research (and therefore the work that I present here): a) Substantive contribution. Does the work make a contribution to the state of our understanding of the subject matter? b) Aesthetic merit. Does the work succeed aesthetically in that it is satisfyingly complex? c) Reflexivity. How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text? d) Impact. Does the research affect the reader intellectually and/or emotionally? e) Expressive of reality. Does the text communicate a fleshed out sense of lived experience? (Richardson 15-16). I invite the reader to apply these criteria to the work that follows. They are helpful criteria, but the simple truth may be that each instance of such research must be met upon its own terms, and judgments made about the ultimate usefulness or value of the work based upon its internal rigor and the intellectual integrity that the work manifests. I have no doubt that opinions will differ.

My project is this: I want to theorize that theatrical wonder is characterized by a simultaneous embracing and distancing. I believe that the space and the tension between embracing and distancing, between affect and cognition, empathy and metaphor, correlate closely to spaces and tensions that now have great intellectual currency in a variety of disciplines that study human behavior and capacity, including psychoanalysis, anthropology, neuro-science and others. I make reference to these disciplines without claiming expertise in their various complexities, but instead extracting from them ideas and insights

pertinent to my own project. My theoretical framework for exploring these questions relies upon analyzing performance as a form of communication and understanding as the result of a dialectical process that has both analytical and emotional dimensions.

My methodology is to look to actual theatrical events, in the first case to a production by Theatre de Complicite, the company whose production of *The Street of Crocodiles* impelled me to begin this exploration, as I suggest below. I want, however, to focus on a subsequent production by this company: *Mnemonic*. It is a production that takes up the issue of empathy very directly, even while demonstrating emphatically that Complicite (as the company is familiarly known) remains a masterful practitioner of embodied metaphor. I will also discuss how the teachings and principles of Jacques Lecoq have found expression in the work of Complicite. Then I consider three of my own productions. The first is *Harry's Way*, a production I directed in 1997 of a new play by Keith Huff, in which I worked with notions of empathy and metaphor before I had begun to think about them in theoretical ways. The lessons I have extracted from my experience with *Harry's Way* have less to do with the generation of wonder than some discoveries about conditions which may preclude wonder, especially an excessive familiarity with controlling metaphors and too much intellectual distance between spectator and character. The second production is a *Romeo and Juliet* that I set in the contemporary Middle East in a self-conscious attempt to manipulate empathy while drawing metaphorical

connections between the world of Shakespeare's play and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. That production engaged an interrogation of the parameters of empathy directly and also raises vexing questions about performance ethnography and the representation of an exotic other. Finally, I will consider my 2004 production of Edward Albee's newest play, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* - a work which seeks to invoke empathy in the context of exploring the essence of the tragic and which seeks to make a plea for tolerance by means of a metaphoric transposition. This production serves as an opportunity to explore wonder, not as a phenomenon of delight, but in the context of tragedy.

I write as both critic and director, as a sort of autoethnographer and as a participant/observer.[2] I write, too, as a politically engaged person, convinced that theatre remains a viable location for community dialogue and public discourse, a place where provocative ideas may be considered forthrightly, and a better world imagined collectively. Above all, I write as a seeker, in hungry pursuit of those rare occasions that I have chosen to call theatrical wonder.

I experienced a sense of wonder at a theatrical event on the occasion of my very first exposure to professional theatre. I was five years old when my parents took me to see the Broadway production of *Peter Pan*, starring Mary Martin. This was an overwhelming and foundational experience that ignited a passion for

[2] I am qualifying my own self-identification as an autoethnographer, because autoethnography is usually a present practice that values the immediacy of present experience, while some of my own work necessarily involves a retrospective interrogation of events that were certainly experienced personally but have since passed into memory. On these occasions, it might be said that I am manifesting a post-modern gesture to increased self-reflexivity in ethnography generally, rather than a true autoethnographic practice. I believe, however, that the same evaluative criteria apply.

theatre that resulted in my first work as a professional child actor three years later and continues to this day in my work as a director, teacher and critic. I can still summon vivid memories of that production (the nicely contained, non-threatening evil of Captain Hook and the Pirates, the seductive adventurousness of Wendy and the Lost Boys, and of course the unmitigated thrill of Mary Martin as Peter Pan gleefully flying through the audience), but one aspect of that production performs more brightly in memory than any other: the near death of Tinkerbell and her salvation by the restorative power of the audience's belief.

Tinkerbell, Peter's loyal fairy companion, was not portrayed by an actor; Tinkerbell was portrayed by a moving light, a tightly focused, twinkling follow spot whose gyrations, especially to the imagination of a child, seemed endlessly articulate in communicating what "Tink" was feeling. When, in an act of selfless devotion, Tinkerbell consumed poison intended for Peter, she hovered near death (represented by a dimming of the light which was Tinkerbell) while Peter desperately implored the audience to save her through the collective power of its belief in fairies. Peter exhorted us to demonstrate that belief by our applause; I still remember my five-year-old sense of urgency in loudly and rapidly clapping my hands. And I remember my delight (and considerable relief) as Tinkerbell's light grew and brightened, signifying her return to health.

In retrospect, I am interested in the implications of Peter's direct address to the audience. Did Mary Martin's obliteration of the fourth wall in that moment figure in the scope of my reaction and the vividness of my recollection of the

event? I cannot be sure, of course, but I believe that that direct address established conditions of intersubjectivity that, at the very least, facilitated my emotional engagement. And some of the theoretical argument that will follow will support that belief.

Now even as a five-year-old, I knew that a light was not a living creature, supernatural or otherwise. This was simply the occasion of my earliest theatrical suspension of disbelief. But I was amazed. I had never conceived of representing a creature metaphorically with a flickering light, but I had no difficulty whatsoever in making this leap of imagination, and, as I will contend, the operation of the imagination in the processing of metaphor, especially novel, theatrical metaphor, is a phenomenon closely linked to our capacity to conceive new ideas, new possibilities. At the moment of Tinkerbell's crisis, I was immersed in waves of both emotion and thought: an appreciation of Tinkerbell's courageous sacrifice, my identification with Peter's desperation to save his friend, my own active need to help, and my truly joyous relief at her recovery. I thought the entire episode was wonderful – that is to say, filled with wonder.

Throughout my life of theatre going (and theatre-making), I have been fortunate enough to revisit one or more versions of this experience of wonder on memorable occasions. One such occasion led specifically to my present attempt to think about theatrical wonder in a disciplined way. In July 1998, I attended, with my wife, Claire, and daughter, Galen, a performance in New York of *The Street of Crocodiles*, a theatre piece created by Theatre de Complicite and based

upon the life and extraordinary writing of Bruno Schulz, a Jewish and Polish writer killed by Nazis at the height of his creative powers. I had read the novella *Street of Crocodiles* (from which the theatre piece takes its name) and been swept away by the imaginative power of Schultz's writing, which seemed to me to flow from a surrealist tradition but also to anticipate magic realism and fantastic writing. His work struck me as quintessentially literary, using the theatre of the reader's imagination to stage events that defied realization in more concrete and corporeal terms. I was more than a little curious (and more than a little skeptical) to see how this work could be interpreted in physical terms, to be embodied in real time and space.

I had seen Complicite's work before (the touring production of *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol*), and was familiar enough with the company's aesthetic to understand that it was committed to a highly imaginative physical theatre, in which the bodies of actors were used to suggest all kinds of creatures and even inanimate objects, an aesthetic of embodied metaphor that was capable of surprising and delighting. I knew, too, that this was a company with decidedly literary sensibilities, frequently using non-dramatic literature as a foundation for ensemble-devised theatrical works. But nothing had prepared me for the impact of this particular theatrical experience.

At the conclusion of this performance (which I will describe in the next chapter), I found myself weeping uncontrollably, moved not only by the content of the performance and its holocaust context, but by an appreciation of the artistry

of the production. I was simultaneously devastated by the senseless death of someone whose extraordinary creative gifts offered so much to the world, and infused with a sense of wonder about the creative gifts of Complicite in finding a theatrical vocabulary that could express the fantastic flights of imagination that typified Schulz's writing (for example, the seamless transformation of a group of people involved in reading their books into a flock of chattering birds in which fluttering and manipulated pages somehow conjured wings in flight). The cumulative impact of watching astonishingly evocative images, constructed with simple materials and the bodies of the actors in endlessly inventive ways, simply overwhelmed me. I sat and sobbed throughout the curtain call and until the theatre had emptied. We were the last spectators to leave the auditorium, and even over drinks in a nearby café after the performance, I found myself unable to summon afterimages of the performance without a profound emotional accompaniment. Later, I learned that the technique that supported this highly moving work was, in part, derived from the teachings of Jacques Lecoq. I will discuss some of the principles of that training and consider their implications for the creation of moments of theatrical wonder in Chapter Two.

My own directorial work had for years been moving away from psychological realism and toward a style which was unabashedly "theatrical," influenced both by my own intuitive process and by my readings about Meyerhold's theories and practice. I have always been fascinated by the seemingly mysterious ways that theatre artists enter into a partnership with the imaginative powers of audiences,

with the ways in which theatrical metaphors conjure worlds and associations that are startling in their newness and beauty. I have also been keenly interested in the ways that theatre could stimulate strong feelings of empathy, even while simultaneously engaging serious ideas and calling upon its audiences to think critically. It was only after the experience of *The Street of Crocodiles*, however, that I began to think about these two phenomena of theatrical reception, empathy and metaphor, in a critically rigorous way and to contemplate the implications of their convergence in a single theatrical moment.

While I am vitally concerned with this convergence, I am also mindful that both the phenomenon of empathy and the use and perception of metaphor are separately and discretely important in theatre practice. It may even be possible to identify a dimension of what I call wonder that is specific to each of these phenomena. I want, therefore, to consider the import of each of them individually as well as to explore the implications of their combination.

Empathy, in terms of its definitional contours and especially in terms of its perceived usefulness in the theatre, has been a controversial topic. There has been, and continues to be, confusion about the distinctions between empathy and a more general kind of emotional identification, and more recently the notion of intersubjectivity. The idea of empathy was intuited by Aristotle several millennia before the term was coined. Aristotle's famous formulation of "pity and fear," as the appropriate and productive consequence of the tragic experience, rests upon an insight that the tragic spectator might be expected to empathize

with the tragic hero. Many centuries later, the operation of empathy was decried by Brecht as an impediment to an intellectual apprehension of various social problems and, therefore, an impediment to a politically efficacious theatre. But more contemporary insights about the operation of empathy, indeed, about the nature of consciousness itself, may advance the primary Brechtian project of articulating a means of theatrical production that advances a progressive political agenda even as they debunk portions of Brecht's argument. That is, in part, what I intend to argue.

Our understanding of metaphor has journeyed from an appreciation of a purely literary device that compares one thing to another to a far-reaching conception of metaphor as a foundational element of the human thought process. I intend to examine, in the context of theatrical reception, whether there is a distinction between metaphors that are perceived as largely conceptual, by some kind of purely intellectual operation, and those which are somehow embodied, that is, both created and received in some fashion that depends upon the physical senses. Moreover, I want to explore whether novel or unusual metaphors have a different impact in theatrical contexts than do familiar ones. I believe that the use and perception of metaphor in theatrical circumstances are part of a holistic phenomenon, an aspect of an emotional and intellectual ecology, which enables spectators to move imaginatively outside of their own parochial experience and concerns in uniquely pleasurable ways that have significant political and critical implications. It is intriguing to note, in this regard,

that George Lakoff, well-known and frequently cited in this project for his theoretical work on metaphor, observes in his book *Moral Politics* that empathy with its definitional notion of projecting consciousness into the mind and body of another, something that cannot be literally achieved, is itself metaphorical (2002: 114). Moreover, Lakoff associates empathy directly, even causally, with liberal or progressive values.

My particular project is to explore both these phenomena of perception, empathy and metaphor, in a specifically theatrical context, which I have chosen to call theatrical wonder. Wonder is an experiential phenomenon complex enough to enfold multiple criteria. I understand theatrical wonder to mean, in part, a sense of awe, in the most expansive meaning of the word. Awe may be characterized variously as delight, reverence or dread, but in all cases, the idea of awe carries with it an intimation of something outside ordinary experience, a nod toward something larger than the self and its customary frames of reference. As a component of theatrical wonder, awe suggests an excitement at a sudden expansion of perceived possibility, an insight which is deepened by what is *felt* in that moment of perception. That quality of feeling, which is also a component of theatrical wonder, is triggered by the engagement of profound emotion linked to the spectator's appreciation of the specific circumstances of a character on stage. I do not mean to suggest that wonder represents some kind of necessarily optimistic insight about human potential, though in some cases it might represent precisely that. My conception of wonder is broad enough to

include a profound sadness, where the expansion of perceived possibility gestures toward an appreciation of the horrifying way in which a capacity for cruelty or an inability to affect the sweep of destructive circumstances may coexist with a fearsome beauty, the peculiar pleasures, for example, of tragedy (or the pleasures I experienced on seeing *Street of Crocodiles*).

I believe that the phenomenon of theatrical wonder is important not only because it represents a significant and powerful experience that is part of the dynamic range of theatrical reception, but also because it represents a gesture toward a conception of alternative ways of knowing or understanding someone or something outside the narrow personal experience of the spectator, and, therefore, offers transformational opportunities that are especially useful in building communities and mindsets, even temporary ones, that may imagine new and better worlds, a necessary precondition of progressive social change. Jill Dolan has engaged a similar idea in her articulation of the "utopian performative," an ephemeral moment in live performance when the spectator, in an often complicated dynamic with the performer, recognizes, if only in the moment, the possibility of a better world: "In these utopian performative moments, we can experience emotionally and affectively, as well as intellectually and aesthetically, politically and spiritually, the possibilities of a world purposefully, revealingly, out of joint. In the rupture of the possible into the real, we can feel our way elsewhere" (2004: 4).

I want to emphasize that Dolan has identified a complex phenomenon of experience that involves both affective and intellectual criteria, a complexity of experience that is also necessarily bound up in the experience of empathy, as I suggest in the following section of my argument. I am asserting that it is precisely this potent combination of emotion and cognition (in the form of an empathic reaction) that unites with the expansion of imagination (represented by the apprehension of metaphor) in a theatrical context to yield wonder.

Thinking about Empathy

I want to think about empathy in a variety of ways. I want to think about it first in terms of a general definition, because the notion of empathy actually encompasses several meanings. I want to think about it in terms of recent theorizing about consciousness, and suggest that if "feeling" is fundamental to individual consciousness, then empathetic "feeling" is an essential element of collective consciousness and, therefore, community. I want to propose some distinctions between empathy and identification and argue that intersubjectivity is an especially dynamic form of empathy, a form that has been utilized extensively in the social sciences as well as in performance theory. Finally, I want to observe several of the historical ways that empathy has been considered in theatre practice. This broad introduction to a multi-faceted conception of empathy will resonate (I hope) in my narratives about my efforts to explore empathy through the lens of my reception of Theatre de Complicite's production

of *Mnemonic* and through my own directorial activities in *Harry's Way, Romeo and Juliet,* and *The Goat.*

The word "empathy," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is derived from the Greek *empatheia*, which is usually translated as affection or passion, but the word was not coined until the early part of the twentieth century. It is a translation of the German word *einfühlung*, which was used in aesthetic criticism to mean "the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation" (where the object of contemplation was a work of art). It is fascinating to note, therefore, that from the beginning of its usage, the word empathy was associated with the realm of art. Moreover, the word was from its beginning associated with comprehension or understanding. Here is the critical difference between emotional identification and true empathy. Whereas emotional identication suggests a shared (or mimiced) experience, empathy suggests that a shared experience may yield something more: an intellectual process that contains an interpretive or critical function, that of understanding. It is precisely this intellectual process, itself an amalgamation of both emotion and analysis that lends empathy its distinctive usefulness. And, when combined with the imaginative leap associated with the perception of metaphor, empathy can yield a potent mixture of understanding and vision – the province of wonder.

The definition of empathy has been considerably expanded from its origin in aesthetics. Psychologists list at least three definitions of "empathy" which are

pertinent here: "1) a cognitive awareness and understanding of the emotions and feelings of another person [that is, an intellectual grasping of another's affect]; 2) a vicarious affective response to the emotional experiences of another person that mirrors or mimics that emotion [this emotional sharing would be in my formulation more akin to emotional identification]; and 3) assuming, in one's mind, the role of another person [actually taking on the perspective of another]" (Reber 249). The nuances of definition shift between emphases that are emotional and those that are cognitive – and between understanding and actually standing in another's circumstances. Kathleen Cotton, in a paper reviewing fifty-eight articles considering the role of empathy in education, concludes that the majority of psychologists and educators agree that empathy includes both cognitive processes and affective experiences ("Developing Empathy").

This insight about the complementary nature of emotional and cognitive response from the social sciences is confirmed by contemporary theory in neuroscience. In his recent book *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999), the celebrated neurologist Antonio Damasio sets forth an argument for a neurological explanation of consciousness. Summarizing his earlier research, which demonstrated that an impairment in consciousness was almost always associated with impaired emotional response, Damasio states flatly that "consciousness and emotion are not separable" (16). Dismissing the reluctance of medical science (until now) to explore the relationship of emotion and consciousness as a remnant of the formerly predominant Cartesian model that

bifurcates mind and body, Damasio theorizes that “the alleged vagueness, elusiveness, and intangibility of emotions and feelings is . . . an indication of how we cover the representation of our bodies, of how much mental imagery based on nonbody objects and events mask the reality of the body . . . Sometimes we use our minds to hide a part of our beings from another part of our beings” (29). For Damasio, both emotions and feelings (he defines “feeling” as the private, mental experience of an emotion), together with the consciousness that allows us to formulate ranges of response, are important evolutionary adaptations that have helped to insure human survival.

I believe Damasio’s argument may be extended further. If the capacity to experience emotion as feeling is critical to the development of individual consciousness, then perhaps the capacity to experience the emotional state of another individual, to feel empathetically, helps to account for human communication and the alliances made possible by such communication, surely another critical evolutionary adaptation. It is not insignificant that Damasio uses a theatrical metaphor, implying a spectator and a performer in describing the operation of emotion in consciousness: “Emotion was probably set in evolution before the dawn of consciousness and surfaces in each of us as a result of inducers we often do not recognize consciously; on the other hand, feelings perform their ultimate and longer-lasting effects in the theater of the conscious mind” (37). I believe that the capacity to apprehend the “feelings,” the private mental experiences of another, or empathy, are vital to the actual theatrical

encounter, the part of that encounter that requires an understanding of human experience and behavior by a group of individual consciousnesses. It is an explanation, too, for the raw stuff of community, an enterprise that necessarily reckons with both individuals and groups, with intellect and with feeling. The theatre is a site of fusion, where distinctions between cognitive and affective response melt into an experiential gestalt that gestures toward an ecology of human response, an ecology of response that in its capacity to conjure unanticipated possibilities of both analysis and emotion, may gesture both toward utopian performatives and the experience of wonder.

An issue that reverberates throughout any discussion of empathy is the elasticity of language used to describe the phenomenon. In various discourses, the words empathy, identification, and intersubjectivity are used almost interchangably. Yet there are, for purposes of this discussion, some important differences.

The concept of identification, in theatre studies as elsewhere, has been linked to the politics of identity. Elin Diamond has argued, for example, that identification, which she descibes as "becoming or inhabiting the other on stage or in spectatorial fantasy" is associated with mimesis, especially in realistic drama. She cautions that "[s]uch acts are distinctly imperialistic and narcissistic: I lose nothing – there is no loss of self – rather I appropriate you, amplifying my 'I' into an authoritative 'we'" (1992: 390). Diamond goes on, however, to rescue identification from a swamp of regressive ideology by invoking a Freudian

pychoanalytical model that conceives of identification as a constitutive part of psychic life, where the ego is the product of a historical process of object choices. "In other words, it would be impossible to conceptualize a subject in the process of identification who would not be engaged, however, unconciously, with the history of her identifications, which is at least partly the the history of her psychic life with others" (396). Diamond, by focusing on the historicity of the identifying process, has located it squarely within the parameters of a materialist analysis. Because cultural subjects are able to inhabit powerfully depicted roles that are understood as a product of their material circumstances, the possibility of some kind of progressive transformation is preserved, at least theoretically. Diamond's materialist perspective on identification seems particularly apt since identification in my view focuses on becoming or inhabiting the other in terms of assuming that other's material identity markers. In other words, I associate identification with a close engagement of material circumstances. It is theoretically possible, I believe, either as an actor or a spectator, to identify with the circumstances of a character without the primary emotional engagement that I associate with empathy, to achieve identification despite an emotional detachment. Diamond's analysis of the identificatory process then is well-suited to a Brechtian theatrical model.[3]

I understand intersubjectivity to imply a communication, with both cognitive and affective dimensions, between at least two subjectivities in which each is

[3] Diamond develops these ideas further and with specific reference to Brechtian theory in *Unmaking Mimesis.* I will take up part of her analysis in a discussion of Brecht later in this paper.

fully aware of the other and that mutual awareness is confirmed in some way. In other words, I understand intersubjectivity to mean a kind of expanded or multiple empathy that is both interactive and dynamic, precisely the circumstances that exist between spectator and performer at a theatrical event. The idea of intersubjectivity has achieved especially far-ranging impact in the social sciences.

In 1932, Alfred Schutz in his *Phenomenology of the Social World* argued through a process of phenomenological description and eidetic reduction for the possibility of intersubjective communication and its value in the social sciences. The reverberations of this work have been profound. Intersubjectivity, as a tactic for understanding others and as a profitable psychic location where the forces of identification and difference may be interrogated, has gained considerable currency in diverse discursive enterprises, in anthropology, in psychoanalysis, and in political science, among others.

Anthropologist Michael Jackson makes the case for intersubjectivity in ethnography in his *Minima Ethnographica*. Tracing the idea of intersubjectivity to Martin Buber's dialogic process, Schutz's social phenomenology, the pragmatism of William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, and existential/phenomenological thinking generally, Jackson understands the focus of intersubjectivity as the dynamic interplay between subject and object, between ego and alter (6) – and as the platform on which empathy, transference or analogy may bridge the gap between "me and you" (10). Acknowledging that the

idea of intersubjectivity is inherently paradoxical and ambiguous, Jackson promotes it nevertheless a means of negotiating the tensions between individual and collective experience, between particularity and universality. It is, for him, a means of addressing "a paradox of human existence – that one can be in the world only if one feels that one's own world is, in some significant sense, also *the* world. In other words, it is irrelevant whether the psychic unity of humankind is proven scientifically or accepted on ideological grounds because it is existentially imperative. Human sameness everywhere consists in similar differences" (15). The intersubjective approach does not allow Jackson to view the particular and the opposed as static and in opposition. Rather they are a perpetual dialectic that contemplates no resolution. His thesis is that control over the relationship and balance of these worlds is a central human preoccupation (20-21).

Jessica Benjamin, who approaches intersubjectivity both from psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives, sounds a similar theme. She characterizes her project as one that explores "a series of complimentary polarities, showing how we move in and out of entanglement in them. Subject and object, active and passive, observer and participant, knower and known – these reversible complementarities have structured the psychoanalytic relationship. The intersubjective perspective is concerned with how we create the third position that is able to break up the reversible complementarities and hold in tension the polarities that underly them" (xiv). Her embrace of intersubjectivity is informed by a passionate idealism that imagines a practice

that values creative tension and collaboration, giving her reason to "hope that we may enlarge the dialogic space that engenders the third position, that the oppositions we present can play in freedom their hour upon the stage" (xx).

Feminist political scientist Jodi Dean, in *The Solidarity of Strangers* (1996), stakes out a claim for a third, intersubjective position that she calls "reflective solidarity."

> I define reflective solidarity as the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship. This conception of solidarity relies on the intuition that the risk of disagreement which accompanies diversity must be rationally transformed to provide a basis for our intersubjective ties and commitments. This means that the expression "we" must be interpreted not as given, but as "in process," as the discursive achievement of individuated "I's" (Dean 3).

Dean's contention is that the "we" of solidarity must be understood, not as a monolithic concept in which identities are subordinated to a fiction of commonality, but as a function of a communicative process in which debate, dissent and questioning are reconstituted as factors which actually bond a group (or community) rather than fracturing it. Her essential insight is that in a world composed of multiple and interlacing identities, in which subjects move into and out of various groups in various contexts, we can never be sure who "we" are. That very capacity for movement, however, creates a hypothetical location

between identities that affords a critical location for a newly refined perspective about inclusion and exclusion, a perspective that allows us to take accountability for our exclusions. Our capacity to reflect upon this evokes the potential for community (34).

The quality and extent of intersubjective exchange in the theatre may fluctuate wildly in different circumstances. Theatre events using the convention of a fourth wall may produce meaning in the mutuality of the performer/spectator communication, but that convention militates against the dialogic confirmation, the mutuality of awareness that is a condition of intersubjectivity. The actor in that convention typically does not overtly acknowledge the audience. Other theatre forms, however, emphasize that kind of exchange. I am thinking, for example of the kind of solo performance, especially that developed by feminist performers in recent decades, that directly involves the audience or that finds occasion to physically penetrate the audience, dissolving barriers that otherwise preclude intersubjectivity. This is the phenomenon that Jill Dolan originally described in as a “utopian performative” in her 2001 Theatre Journal article “Performance, Utopia, and the ‘Utopian Performative.’” The same kind of interactive mutual awareness may exist in any performance that indulges in meta-theatrical flourishes, when the fourth wall is intentionally dissolved in a sudden field of mutual awareness. In a more general sense, however, and especially from a phenomenological perspective, conditions of intersubjectivity

are present theoretically in every theatrical encounter in which a spectator and actor are mutually aware, irrespective of the fourth wall.

Stanton B. Garner points out that the bodied nature of the theatrical encounter of performer and spectator introduces a complex series of variables. He observes that as actors enter onto a stage in an auditorium with spectators present, "a fundamental shift takes place with phenomenological consequences different from those for artistic genres where the body fails to make an actual appearance. With this appearance, the phenomenological parameters of both stage and spectatorship undergo complicated reorientation" (1994: 46). Because the actor is herself a subject both aware of and capable of perceiving the spectator, conditions of intersubjectivity and multiperspectivity abound. The actor's body, for example, "constitutes a subject point from which the other elements [on stage] receive competing orientation" (47). A prop exists on stage not only for the visual consumption of a spectator, but also as an instrument that may be manipulated by the actor. Moreover, the actor is capable, whether she does so or not, of returning the gaze of the audience. There is, in Garner's conception of the theatre event, an almost infinite field of perceptual complexity.

> The performer/character's gaze, like the body's living presence that it asserts, exceeds the containing parameters of representational space and confronts the audience's gaze with an intersubjectivity that represents a potential or actual 'catastrophe' in terms of spectatorial detachment. From the

> phenomenological point of view, the living body capable of returning the spectator's gaze presents a methodological dilemma for any theoretical model – like semiotics – that offers to describe performance in 'objective' terms. Alone among the elements that constitute the stage's semiotic field, the body is a sign that looks back (49).

Whether or not the disruption of spectatorial detachment is "catastrophic," it seems clear that, at least on a theoretical level, a condition of intersubjectivity, together with the empathy contained within it, is embedded in the very substance of the theatrical event – and has been recognized, either by its embrace or its attempted rejection, for a very long time.

Theatrical writers sought, from at least the fifth century BCE, to portray characters in circumstances that aroused an emotional response from an audience. Theatrical characters have been conceived, at least from Shakespeare on, as having the capacity to empathize in every way with other characters. It was not until the early part of the twentieth century, however, that a systematic approach for training actors to empathize with the characters that they embodied was developed. Stanislavsky, influenced by a taste for Wagnerian illusionism and the uniquely nuanced performances of Eleanora Duse, devised (at least in his early work) a system of actor training that required actors to "live" their roles by finding a matrix of emotional identification with the experience of the characters they portrayed. Stanislavsky wrote in *An Actor*

Prepares: "The thoughts, feelings, conceptions, reasoning of the author are transformed into his [the actor's] own. And it is not his sole purpose to render the lines so that they shall be *understood*. For him it is necessary that the spectators *feel* his own inner relationship to what he is saying" (quoted by Wiles 18-19, emphasis in the original). Stanislavsky believed (again in his early and most influential work) that only if the actor could empathize with his/her character, could the audience empathize with that character. This was not a new idea (two thousand years earlier, Horace wrote in his *Ars Poetica,* "If you wish me to weep, you yourself must first feel grief"), but Stanislavsky systematized the idea in a method of actor training. David Kaplan, in his acting textbook, *Five Approaches to Acting*, points out with respect to Stanislavsky's system, "No matter what the role, the performance of action and obstacles is meant to elicit *compassion*" (39, emphasis in the original). There can be no question that the evocation of compassion is understood to be a primary benefit of empathy.

In that part of theatre practice that views the theatre as an agent of social change, however, compassion has not always been seen as a boon. Brecht, who sought in his concept of epic theatre a means to facilitate critical thinking and politically efficacious criticism, saw empathy as a byproduct of illusion and as an obstacle to intellectual analysis. He responded by articulating the need for *verfremdungseffekt*, an approach to acting which required the actor, instead of empathizing with his/her character, to maintain a critical distance, discouraging

runaway empathy on the part of an audience that might overwhelm the capacity for detached, critical observation.

Brecht was seeking a theatrical means by which he could "disrupt the viewers' normal or run of the mill perception by introducing elements that will suddenly cause the viewer to see familiar objects in a strange way and to see strange objects in a familiar way" (Fuegi, 83). His intention was "to stress that understanding is fundamentally dialogic, first in the stance of the actor vis-à-vis himself as he presents his role, and secondly between the actor and the spectator" (Kiebuzinska 88). In his emphasis on dialogic understanding, Brecht, along with his contemporary in Russia, Meyerhold, anticipated a means of approaching performance analysis that is of compelling interest today, but in his anti-empathic model for theatre, he overlooked the real usefulness of empathy (and more specifically intersubjectivity) in assisting the achievement of a more just society[4].

To create a better world, a kinder and more just world, one must first be able to imagine it. André Gide wrote in *Portraits and Aphorisms*, "True kindness presupposes the faculty of imagining as one's own the suffering and joy of others." He is clearly offering a compelling social justification for empathy as well as touting the beneficial byproducts of a well-exercised imagination. Empathy has been hailed, after all, as a vital ingredient in any moral education (Verducci). It is interesting to note that educational theorist Maxine Greene ties imagination

[4] I take up Brechtian theory and empathy, along with the theoretical interventions of various contemporary critics, in much more detail in the course of my consideration of theatrical wonder and tragedy in Chapter Five.

directly to empathy: “One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (3). And with particular regard to an investigation of theatrical wonder, imagination in the theatre is inextricably linked to the perception and understanding of metaphor.

Thinking about Metaphor

Imagination is more than an enabler of empathy. It is the means by which we make meaningful use of metaphor. It is imagination that enables us to conceive something in an experiential phenomenon that may be paradoxically outside our own historical experience. It is imagination, summoned as an aid to understanding, which enabled me as a five year old to transform a moving spotlight into the vibrant seductive persona of Tinkerbell the fairy. And while the process of aging may diminish its scope, imagination remains the engine that makes metaphor possible. But the province of metaphor, wherein reside definitions, associations, modes of operation, and implications, has been difficult to explore and even more resistant to cartography.

Theatre, of course, has always made extensive use of metaphor as a means of engaging the imagination of the spectator to create theatrical worlds and generate new insights. It is not an exaggeration to say that metaphor is as fundamental a component of theatrical technique as is mimesis. In the most basic way, any realistic theatrical representation, whether environmental

(scenographic) or behavioral (actors depicting characters) relies upon the convention whereby audiences understand that what is actually transpiring before them is meant to represent another fictional world. In their most basic operation, that of communicative comparison, metaphors quite literally make theatrical representation possible. But I suspect that practitioners have always understood that the potential of communicated comparison offers more than an opportunity for representation. Metaphor enables imaginative leaps that generate insight.

This is, to choose one obvious example, a foundational premise of scenographic design, where design students are routinely taught to develop metaphors as a way of conceiving design ideas that communicate insights they have developed about the world of the playtext that their design references. In 1941, Robert Edmund Jones, the great teacher of stage design, advised young stage designers that "[i]n the theatre the exciting thing is never the actual thing" (Jones 82). He instructed his students that

> What we are now interested in . . . is not illusion, but allusion, and allusion to the most magical beauty. *I seek less*, said Walt Whitman, *to display any theme or thought and more to bring you into the atmosphere of the theme or thought – there to pursue your own flight* (136, italics in original).

In this brief bit of exhortation, Jones managed not only to articulate the value for the theatre artist of metaphorical thinking, but also to gesture both to the necessity of the spectator's participation in the dynamic of theatrical achievement and to the received wisdom that metaphor, for the theatre practitioner just as for the poet, represents a heightened form of artistic expression. The somewhat exalted notion of metaphor as belonging squarely and exclusively in the realm of the poetic would be decisively challenged roughly four decades later, when Lakoff and Johnson published *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980*,* and in the process transformed cognitive linguistics.

Lakoff and Johnson argued persuasively that the very structure of our thinking is metaphorical. While acknowledging that the essence of metaphor is the understanding and/or experience of one thing in terms of another (5), Lakoff and Johnson take pains to distinguish what they mean by metaphor from the more commonplace understanding of metaphor as a poetic substitution. They argue that the word "metaphor" refers to a construct in which one concept (the target domain) is understood in terms of another concept (the source domain). For example, in the metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY[5], the rather abstract idea of love, is linguistically understood in terms of the more empirically experienced aspects of a journey. Lakoff offers examples of the ways in which commonplace verbal expressions demonstrate the ways in which we think: "Look *how far we've*

[5] It is a convention of the literature of cognitive linguistics to represent conceptual metaphors in capital letters. These are distinguished from linguistic metaphorical expressions, more specific verbal expressions that manifest or illustrate the larger construct of the conceptual metaphor. The quoted examples cited are linguistic metaphorical expressions, and these are typically expressed with ordinary type.

come. It's been a *long, bumpy road.* We may have to *go our separate ways.* . . We're *spinning our wheels*. Our relationship is *off the track.* The marriage *is on the rocks* (Lakoff 1993, 206).

Lakoff argues that this phenomenon of language should be understood, not as poetic or as calculated to produce a particular rhetorical effect, but as a means of understanding and conceptualizing abstract or elusive ideas.

> [T]he metaphor can be understood as a mapping (in the mathematical sense) from a source domain (in this case, journeys) to a target domain (in this case, love). The mapping is tightly structured. There are ontological correspondences, according to which entities in the domain of love (e.g., the lovers, their common goals, their difficulties, the love relationship, etc.) correspond systematically to entities in the domain of a journey (the travelers, the vehicle, destinations, etc.) (207).

Lakoff goes on to demonstrate that many basic concepts, including those dealing with time, quantity, state, change, action, cause, purpose, and others, are understood metaphorically. These are conventional conceptual metaphors, deeply entrenched in our way of thinking.

Individual metaphorical linguistic expressions, on the other hand, may be quite unconventional. This is the province of novel metaphoric expression that we are accustomed to regarding as the province of artists and poets, where the

very unusual character of a perceived comparison may assist the reader/spectator in seeing the world in new ways (Kövecses 32). Linguistic research has suggested that artists regularly employ several devices to create novel language and images from commonplace language and thought. These include extending, elaboration, questioning and combining. In extending, a conventional conceptual metaphor is expressed by new linguistic means based on introducing a new conceptual element in the source domain. In elaboration, an existing element of the source domain is used in an unusual way. In questioning, the appropriateness of an everyday metaphor is called into question. The device of combining, as the term implies, suggests the activation of several known metaphors simultaneously (47-49). All of these devices are useful in understanding the manner in which theatrical metaphors register in especially potent ways, and I will refer to them in the analysis of various performances that is to follow. I intend to argue, using the insights of philosopher and literary critic Paul Ricoeur, that novel metaphors are an essential ingredient of wonder. Before turning to Ricoeur, however, I want to consider one other aspect of Lakoff and Johnson's research that has flowed from their consideration of metaphor, that part of their research dealing with the embodied nature of the mind.

In their recent book *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor is a neural mechanism that allows us to adapt those neural systems employed in sensory-motor activity for the purpose of creating a means of abstract thinking. In other words, anything we are able to conceive is shaped

and determined, in fact, limited by, the physical processes that are the ways in which our bodies and brains engage the world. This is yet another direct refutation of the (increasingly) quaint Cartesian notion of a mind/body duality. It is also a scientific affirmation of the essential insights of the select group of philosophers who have argued either that the body is a site of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology) or that insight is the direct result of experience Dewey's pragmatism). Like the insistence of neuro-scientists that cognitive and emotional aspects of mental process are inseparable, this conception of metaphor has interesting implications for the theatre theorist. If the perception of metaphor is an embodied process, then perhaps the evocation of metaphor in a highly embodied context, the dynamically experiential context of theatre, has a special potency that is different from the perception of metaphor by reading. I want, too, to pose a question about the source of the metaphor. Does it follow that a metaphor, which is itself constructed in an embodied way, i.e., using the body of the performer, has an impact that is different than a metaphor which is conjured entirely on the basis of an idea, perceived as a result of absorbing a disembodied conceptual reference? I shall attempt to address these questions in the chapters that follow.

For philosopher and critic Paul Ricoeur, a consideration of the operation and interpretation of metaphor is an integral aspect of his larger concern, the examination of language as discourse and a theory that accounts for the

communication of meaning.[6] Discourse, according to Ricoeur, who applies a complex melding of phenomenological analysis and hermeneutic exegesis, is a dialectic of event and meaning. The event, which for Ricoeur is the reading of a written text, but which I suggest is equally applicable to the reception of a theatrical work, is, from the perspective of the writer (or creator), experience as expression. The event is also, however, composed of the intersubjective exchange between the writer/creator and the recipient of the communication. That exchange, which includes a sense of lived experience, produces meaning, which is, in its public manifestation, discourse (Valdes 262). Ricoeur's position with regard to metaphor is that metaphoric language propels human discourse toward new meanings (Gerhart 217). Ricoeur reasons that metaphor plays a vital role in the process of interpreting the meaning of a given text by acknowledging the need to make sense as the basis for all meaning.

Critical to Ricoeur's theory of metaphor (and to his theories generally with regard to discursive language) is his distinction between semiotics and semantics. Semiotics, as the science of signs, relies upon the capacity of the critic to reduce language to its constitutive parts.[7] For Ricoeur, however, semiotics is ill-equipped to engage questions of meaning inasmuch as it deals with language at a lexical level, whereas meaning is produced, in his argument,

[6] Thomas Postlewait, defending the use of narrative in historical writing in "History, Hermeneutics, and Narrativity," cites Ricoeur for the proposition that the relationship between history and narrative centers on the need for explanation and interpretation considering history. Here, as in his consideration of discourse generally, Ricoeur blends perspectives which are experiential (phenomenological) and interpretive (hermeneutic).

[7] Indeed, when considering the theatre event from a semiotic perspective, Keir Elam rehearses C.S. Pierce's typology of signs: the icon, the index and the symbol. Metaphor is specifically identified as an example of iconicity (Elam 21).

at a discursive level. Semantics, which is the science of the sentence, deals with the integrative capacity of language and is better suited to a consideration of meaning (Valdes 262). This notion of integrative capacity is useful, not only in semantic analysis, but also in the analysis of the theatrical event, whose constituent parts combine in a gestalt of experience, the reception of which involves, at least in part, a struggle to extract meaning. Bert O. States, in explaining his phenomenological approach to theatre, alludes to Ricoeur's integrative capacity of language in explaining his use of the term "image" to signify the full range of theatrical representation as an effort to "abridge the process of signification and throw the emphasis onto the empathic response" (24).

Whereas ordinary language tends to reassert the lexical meanings of word in a sentence, the tension created by the need to interpret metaphor destroys the consistency of those words, creating a condition where new meaning can be encountered (Gerhart 216-217). It is important to note that Ricoeur is speaking about "live" as opposed to "dead" metaphors. Dead metaphors are those so assimilated into the language that their consideration produces no tension for the reader. Meaning is apparent. Live metaphors, on the other hand, especially novel ones, have a productively disruptive capacity that requires an interpretive process and a need to discern meaning. "The sense of a novel metaphor . . . is the emergence of a new semantic congruence or pertinence from the ruins of the literal sense shattered by semantic incompatibility or absurdity" (Ricoeur 1978,

151). For purposes of my analysis, Ricoeur's live metaphors function much in the way that the novel metaphorical linguistic expression does for cognitive linguists. Both require interaction with a recipient to manufacture meaning in an uncertain field where intention melts into the open textuality of perception. "[U]nderstanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavor as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules" (Davidson 29). And both concepts of metaphor can be transferred from a realm of pure language to the multi-dimensional forms of signification found in the theatre.

Ricoeur even extends his consideration of metaphor to include the idea that both imagination and feeling are necessary aspects of the process by which metaphor may be theorized to yield informative value or a truth claim. His argument is laid out in his essay "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," published in 1978. He works from Aristotle's earliest observations about metaphor to assert that the idea of metaphor necessarily carries with it the corollary notion of resemblance (the essence of the kind of implied comparison that metaphors represent). Resemblance in turn has a visual or pictorial dimension, what Ricoeur calls the "*picturing function*" of metaphorical meaning (142, italics in original). This picturing function is a product of an imaginative process, a process that involves both "a thinking and a seeing" (145).

Ricoeur, in asserting the semantic and visual character of metaphor, invokes the idea of metaphoric embodiment:

> The very expression ‘figure of speech’ implies that in metaphor, as in the other tropes or turns, discourse assumes the nature of a body by displaying forms and traits which usually characterize the human face, man’s ‘figure’; it is as though the tropes gave to discourse a quasi-bodily externalization. By providing a kind of figurability to the message, the tropes make discourse appear (142).

It is not that he refutes the iconic character claimed for metaphor by semiotic theorists. Rather, he argues that the metaphoric icon is described rather than presented. Its description requires a process of construction or interpretation, which is the realm of imagination (148). Ricoeur compares the function of metaphor in discourse with the function of a model in scientific pursuits, arguing that a metaphor may be seen as a model for changing our way of looking at things. “The word ‘insight,’ very often applied to the *cognitive* import of metaphor, conveys in a very appropriate manner this move from sense to reference which is no less obvious in poetic discourse than in so-called descriptive discourse” (150, italics in original). Clearly, this idea of moving from sense to reference in an imaginative field has significant implications for a consideration of the theatrical process, which may begin in the apprehension of various sensory stimuli and proceed, as I contend in my discussion of wonder, to the generation of original and useful insights about the world.

Finally Ricoeur asserts that imagination and feeling have always been closely linked in classical theories of metaphor, noting that the function of rhetoric (and theatre, I might add) has always been understood as "a strategy of discourse aiming at persuading and *pleasing*" (153, my emphasis). His argument that feeling is a necessary part of imagination rests upon his insight that poetic feelings are different than emotions, that in fact, they represent a kind of metamorphosis of emotions, a translation of emotions into a form in which they may be merged with the cognitive dimension of our reading (or spectatorial) experience.

> [F]eelings – I mean poetic feelings – imply a kind of *epoché* of our bodily emotions. Feelings are negative, suspensive experiences in relation to the literal emotions of everyday life. When we read, we do not literally feel fear or anger. Just as poetic language denies the first-order reference of descriptive discourse to ordinary objects of our concern, feelings deny the first-order feelings which tie us to these first-order objects of reference (155).

Ricoeur's distinction between feelings and emotions may, at first blush, seem to militate against my central thesis about the centrality of genuine empathy, with its deeply emotional associations, in that form of theatrical reception, which I call wonder. In fact, however, I think that his distinction is an extremely valuable one, which bears a startling resemblance to Antonio Damasio's contention in *The*

Feeling of What Happens that feelings are simply the private mental experience or awareness of emotions, the merger, in other words, of cognitive and affective reactions. It is precisely this synthesis of emotion and cognition that is implicated both in a general understanding of empathy and in my conception of wonder. Ricoeur has related this same human process to the operation of metaphor, and that, in fact, contributes pertinently and directly, as I will argue, to my exploration of theatrical wonder.

If theatrical wonder is, in fact, precipitated by virtue of a hermeneutic process, a conscious quest for meaning, and if indeed the presence of some kind of emotional rapport is a necessary part of that process, then there must be a mechanism by which emotion is rendered into a form that is compatible with cognitive processes. Damasio's "feeling," understood as the mental operation that allows for awareness of emotion, provides such a mechanism. Ricoeur provides for a substantially similar mechanism by casting "feelings" as an eidetic reduction of "bodily emotions." By bracketing emotion in a phenomenological analysis, Ricoeur allows this otherwise unruly phenomenon profitably to meld into a broader discursive enterprise that privileges cognition.

Ricoeur understands that the production of pleasure is a vital aspect of the discourse of reading (and by extension, theatrical reception), and that the use of metaphor is a strategy for the production of pleasure, as well as a productively disruptive tactic that may generate new insights. For me, the apprehension of metaphor is implicated in that aspect of theatrical wonder that is grounded in

delight as well as that aspect of theatrical wonder that may gesture toward previously unknown or unimagined possibilities. Ricoeur's analysis, in other words, may account for the capacity of metaphor and emotion combined to produce both an elevated sense of pleasure and even an insight that rises to the status of a utopian inkling.

Focusing on Performance

In the context of the theatrical experience, imagination, especially that form of imagination linked to the creation and appreciation of novel metaphor, and empathy, or some form of intersubjective exchange, are sometimes linked in astonishingly original ways. Those occasions are, I believe, occasions of theatrical wonder, but even the more commonplace instances of theatrical empathy require a specific kind of communicative exchange between actor and audience, an exchange that allows for understanding and for the production of meaning. On the issue of theatrical meaning, Meyerhold anticipated current modes of performance analysis. In rejecting the theatrical idea, championed by devotees of realism, of the illusionistic fourth wall, Meyerhold instead considered the audience to be "the fourth dimension" (following the dimensions of playwright, director and actors). Theatrical meaning was not created by the playwright and transmitted to the audience by the actors, but created by the theatre practitioners and the spectators jointly (Leach 30). Meyerhold said quite unambiguously, "We produce every play on the assumption that it will be still unfinished when it

appears on the stage. We do this because we realize that the crucial revision of a production is that made by the spectator" (Braun 256). Meyerhold anticipates the poststructuralist impulse to vest responsibility for the determination of meaning in the recipient of a communication as opposed to the initiator of that communication. He also articulates an interactive theory of the theatre experience, where meaning ultimately resides only in the ephemeral and embodied intersection of performer and spectator on the occasion of a theatrical exchange. This is entirely consistent both with Willmar Sauter's notion of the theatrical event and with Paul Ricoeur's account of discourse as a dialectic of event and meaning.

Willmar Sauter's model of performance analysis focuses on the theatre experience as a communicative event that occurs in the actual encounter of performer and spectator (the mutuality of that encounter is a key part of his analysis) and upon the contexts in which the communication takes place. His characterization of the theatrical encounter as a communicative event considers it a place where meaning is sought. Using a self-described phenomenological approach, Sauter divides theatrical communication into three aspects, which, while being distinguishable from each other, are dynamically interconnected during the process of performance: the *sensory* aspect, the *artistic* aspect, and the *symbolic* aspect. The sensory level of communication may be understood as beginning with an exhibitory practice, by which Sauter means all those factors about an embodied performer which may be perceived by a spectator. They

include both physical features (appearance, movement, facial expression, vocal presence, etc.) and psychological characteristics (intensity, mood, energy, temperament, etc.) The artistic level of communication involves both encoded and decoded communication, which for Sauter includes theatrical conventions, genres, skills and appreciation, pleasures and critical judgments. The symbolic aspect of communication comes into play when the spectator has prior knowledge or accumulated information that allows for associational leaps of interpretation or understanding and for identification and empathy with fictional persona (82-88).

Relying heavily on the hermeneutic theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Sauter argues, "theatre primarily can be understood as a communicative process in which neither the stage image nor the spectator is privileged, but where their mutual intersection marks the nucleus of scholarly interest" (29). Gadamer uses the term "horizon" to describe the historical place and contextual circumstances of the scholar (or, I would suggest, spectator) seeking to interpret a text. The text occupies its own horizon. Horizons, however, move and can be expanded. Gadamer's hermeneutical process contemplates a conscious and systematic encounter of horizons until they melt together in understanding. Sauter quotes Gadamer as writing, "In fact, understanding is always the process of fusion of those horizons, which are assumed to be separate" (89). Sauter applies this model of interpretive process to the theatre event, arguing that the three aspects of performative communication constitute the horizon of the performance text,

and that their reception by a spectator inhabiting his own contextual horizon is both the core of the theatre event and the means by which the meaning of that event is produced.

While Sauter is content to rely on Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur's refinement of Gadamer's interpretive process of literary texts is especially useful in thinking about the theatre event. As I have suggested, Ricoeur introduces the concept of discourse as a dialectic of event and meaning. Mario Valdes explains, "The direct consequence of Ricoeur's theory of the text-reader dialectic to literary criticism is the transformation of interpretation into a dynamic dialectic between the distanciation of the text and the appropriation of the reader" (Valdes 263). In the context of a theatre event, then, horizons are fused in the interactive process of embracing and distancing between performers and audience (the theatrical equivalent to Ricoeur's "community of readers"). Ricoeur understands this process to be generative of new worlds of understanding. He replies to Valdes, "the capacity of redescription or refiguration of the world by the text does not occur unless it becomes a 'shared meaning'; the presumed truth of the redescription of the world can, therefore, only be intersubjective" (Hahn 283). Ricoeur establishes intersubjectivity as the process both by which meaning is sought and new worlds conjured. Sauter's analytical model, as refined by Ricoeur's description of the intersubjective nature of understanding, provides a particularly insightful way to engage the theatrical experience, and I will use it in engaging the theatrical works described in this project.

A brief example will help to demonstrate the application of these ideas. In a subsequent chapter, I will take up my Middle Eastern *Romeo and Juliet*, in which I chose to represent the Montagues as contemporary Israelis and the Capulets as contemporary Palestinians. Using Sauter's analysis, the sensory, artistic, and symbolic elements of the production constituted the horizon of that production, as they would any theatrical production. In this case, however, the symbolic elements of the play included costuming, scenic design and sound that squarely placed the action of the play in an Israeli/Palestinian context. The horizons of individual spectators contained their pre-existing knowledge and opinions about that conflict, together with their pre-existing knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet*. In Gadamer's terms, whatever understanding was achieved by spectators in the course of this event was achieved as a result of the fusion of those horizons. Ricoeur's contribution to this analysis is in understanding that the process by which a reader (spectator) engages or embraces the otherwise detached and distanced text results in a shared meaning, a process which he characterizes as intersubjective. The abstract intersubjectivity that Ricoeur posits in the interpretation of a written text becomes concrete in a performance text, where the intersubjective exchange in phenomenological terms is fully embodied, takes place in real time, and, at least potentially, is mutually acknowledged by spectator and performer. It was my hope in undertaking *Romeo and Juliet*, that, as Ricoeur suggests, the process of seeking understanding could be generative of new meaning. I was hoping to stimulate a

new and deeper level of compassion about a contentious political circumstance. I will discuss the outcome in Chapter Four.

Ricoeur's approach, of distancing and embracing as a dialectical means of achieving understanding, is the central theoretical method of my inquiry. My writing design of incorporating both an analytical engagement with the work I am describing and an autoethnographic consideration of my own place in that work provides a structural mirror to my theoretical method, where the analytical function may be understood as a distancing stance, and my highly subjective description of my own work and thought process, with all the emotional investment that that entails, may be understood as a kind of embracing.

Sauter's conception of the way in which meaning and understanding is produced in the mutuality of the performer/spectator interaction (especially incorporating Ricoeur) provides a platform for thinking about the role of intersubjectivity in the theatre event as well. Theatre can provide such an opportunity for reflective community, for the opportunity to enter into meaningful dialogue about the lived experience of others. Indeed, in some ways the theatre event provides a site for intersubjectivity that is especially apt in theoretical terms. Schutz says, "I apprehend the lived experiences of another only through signitive-symbolic representation, regarding either his body or some cultural artifact he has produced as a 'field of expression' for those experiences" (100). Theatre, along with dance, is the most embodied form of artistic representation;

moreover, it constitutes a field of expression with a full complement of signifying and symbolic conventions.

I believe that theatre represents a uniquely powerful site for the interplay of emotion and cognition. This is what I hope my performance analysis and hermeneutic interrogation will explore, so that through the carefully balanced combination of critical thought and empathic projection, I might better understand wonder, how and when it works—and use that understanding to imagine worlds more just, more inclusive, more beautiful, and more creative than that which we presently inhabit. John Dewey wrote of the implications of the unique capacity of art to meld the actual with the apprehension of the possible.

> While perception of the union of the possible with the actual is itself a great good, the good does not terminate with the immediate and particular occasion in which it is had. The union that is presented in perception persists in the making of impulsion and thought. The first intimations of wide and large redirections of desire and purpose are necessarily imaginative. Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration (349).

I believe that a theoretically informed practice is one way to meld the actual with the possible. For me, the efforts to achieve that represent far more than an

academic exercise. They are a personal quest for theatre that contributes significantly to the mix of aspiration and hope that continues to characterize the art to which I am drawn.

Chapter Two

Theatre de Complicite, Purveyors of Wonder

I stated in Chapter One that I trace much of my present interest in theatrical wonder to a performance of *Street of Crocodiles* by Theatre de Complicite that I attended in 1998. In this chapter, I will argue that Theatre de Complicite (or simply Complicite, as it is often called) serves as an exemplar of the theatrical use of highly original embodied metaphor and how that helps to generate theatrical wonder. I will briefly review my first two experiences witnessing this company's work, and then I will examine the company's performance of *Mnemonic* as an occasion when embodied metaphor is used quite consciously in connection with the evocation of empathy, a set of criteria that I have suggested may yield theatrical wonder. I will argue that the specific training received by the company founders from Jacques Lecoq, with its distinctive embrace of physicality and imagination, helps to account for the techniques used in this production. Finally, I will consider the political implications of *Mnemonic*, which espouses a deeply humanistic conviction about the inter-relatedness of all people, and by extension, the political implications of theatrical wonder.

More than any theatre company of which I am aware, Complicite, led by its artistic director, Simon McBurney, has developed a way of working that yields theatrical experiences flecked with wonder. The company's techniques, which

include a performance style that is highly physical, derive directly from certain aspects of theatrical study devised and promulgated by Jacques Lecoq, with whom the founding members of Complicite trained, especially with regard to those portions of his curriculum that sought to stimulate an exuberant exercise of theatrical imagination and explored the role of embodied metaphor in the transmission of imaginative impulses.

Theatre de Complicite, now twenty-one years old, is led by artistic director Simon McBurney. It was founded in 1983 by McBurney, Annabel Arden and Marcello Magni, all of whom had trained in Paris with Jacques Lecoq (Tushingham 13). The company also acknowledges the influence of Phillipe Gaulier, who had himself been part of Lecoq's faculty before branching out on his own. Historically, the company has undertaken three different kinds of work: Complicite reinterprets classics (a 2004 production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* falls into this category); it adapts works of literature into theatrical form (*The Street of Crocodiles,* adapted from Bruno Schultz's novel of the same name is one example); and it develops its own works from diverse sources. *Mnemonic*, commissioned by the Saltzburger Festspiele in 1999, falls into this latter category. The only authorial credit for this theatre work is "devised by the company," and while a written text has been published, the work of Complicite, often extremely physical, always highly visual, and frequently employing deceptively sophisticated uses of technology alongside centuries-old performance techniques, cannot easily be reduced to the page. *Mnemonic*, in

particular, is a multimedia event, using a complex recorded sound design, automated lighting, video and projected images seamlessly interwoven with the company's trademark style of physical theatre and imaginative staging.

One aspect of that imaginative staging especially pertinent here is the focus of the company on manufacturing metaphors from the raw material of their bodies, especially their bodies in a state of motion. This emphasis on movement and the body as a flexible signifier is both a distinguishing characteristic of the company's aesthetic and a legacy of the Lecoq training that the company's founders shared. I take up the issue of that training below, but it is clear that the work of Complicite addresses the question of whether embodied metaphor has some special currency in theatrical reception, especially with regard to the generation of wonder.

Initial Encounters with Complicite

I had first admired this internationally acclaimed British company for its production of *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol* in 1996, when it was mounted as part of the Lincoln Center Festival. Vincent Canby, in his New York Times review, described that production, which depicts the life, death and afterlife of a French peasant woman, as "a seamlessly performed amalgam of conventional theater, narration, music, movement, and mime" that "fills the great space of the concert hall, not by appearing to reduce the hall's dimensions but by expanding the imagination and the receptivity of the audience" (*New York Times* 9 August

1996). In these summarizing remarks, Canby emphasized two aspects of Complicite's work that are vital to my argument. He emphasized the physical dimension of the performance by referencing its reliance upon movement and mime, and he noted the company's primary achievement: "expanding the imagination and receptivity of the audience."

In *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol,* seven actors play not only the numerous characters figuring in Berger's story, but also a variety of animals, including horses, flocks of birds, and barnyard chickens. The theatrical alchemy practiced by Complicite, however, is not limited to animate creatures. I recall sequences when the actors represented earth as it was being plowed and even more remarkably, blueberry bushes as their fruit was picked. As an actor representing a mountain peasant spoke briefly of picking blueberries, other actors seamlessly move into positions wherein their bodies formed a sort of bramble. As the first actor "picked" the fruit, the "bushes "contracted and trembled in reaction to small violence of their denuding. Moments later, bodies unfolded, and the "bushes" morphed again into the additional peasant characters now required by the narrative. These transformations occurred with an exquisite fluidity.

The technique involved here is much more subtle and nuanced than simple mimetic representation. Once a context is explicated, the actors contrive to form movement patterns with their bodies, sometimes individually and sometimes in coordination with each other, that somehow identify and conjure

one or more specific features or aspects of the thing being represented. Those features or aspects are expressed as physical impulses, readable by virtue of the context in which they are fashioned, and all the more marvelous for having been manufactured from a gesture or posture – or sometimes simply from the rhythm and dynamic of a movement sequence. The performance blurs any boundaries between acting and dancing, but unlike pure dance, never trades in abstractions.

For me, on my first experience of it, the work of Complicite seemed to represent an invigorating blend of the kind of physical theatre that I had previously observed in Europe, a theatre of actorly virtuosity and seemingly unlimited imagination, with a thoughtful and nuanced literary sensibility (*Lucy Cabrol* is adapted from and inspired by a novella by John Berger), and an engaging sense of humor that did not detract at all from the sheer theatrical power of the performance. It was as if some theatrical gods had blended Meyerhold's embrace of popular, virtuosic physical entertainment and Artaud's insistence on the preeminence of theatrical spectacle, and I was artistically smitten.

Complicite returned to New York and the Lincoln Center Festival in 1998 with a revival of its production of *The Street of Crocodiles*, and I was lucky enough to be in New York at that time. I have described my reaction to that extraordinary production in an earlier chapter as one of powerful emotion and untrammeled awe. I experienced a profound sense of empathy for the central character, even as I was marveling at the imaginative use of metaphor that

characterized Complicite's work. I was seized by wonder. It was an experience that triggered many of the interests that now find expression in this writing.

Street of Crocodiles merges a theatrical adaptation of Bruno Schultz's book of the same name with an account of Schultz's life as a reclusive literary figure and a Polish Jew during World War II, culminating in his execution by his Nazi masters shortly before the war ended. Schultz wrote astonishing stories whose imagery and incorporation of the fantastic anticipate magic realism. The very beginning of Complicite's production sets the tone. As Joseph (the Schultz character) sorts books in a Gestapo library, his recollection of his family summons them forth from his imagination. Characters arrive in improbable ways. One walks down an upstage wall perpendicular to the audience, his flying harness detectable only upon close scrutiny. Another emerges wet and dripping from a bucket on the floor that disguises a trap door. Others emerge from bookcases. They all hold books. As the play progresses, grounded only by Joseph's imagination, the Complicite actors practice a technique of suggestive transformation. Bird imagery is everywhere. A single feather flutters from a book held by Joseph. Moments later, a party of bored dinner guests transforms, without benefit of costume change or lighting effect, into a flock of birds – and not just any birds, but clearly differentiated exotic varieties. This is accomplished simply, by the manipulation of the actors' bodies. But props are employed transformationally as well. Actors as birds lift wooden chairs above their heads,

and by virtue of the way they peer through the legs of the chairs, we understand immediately that they are now in a forest.

Ben Brantley wrote in his New York Times review of Complicite's production:

> Shadow and substance bleed and intermingle, and even the most fixed-seeming forms refuse to hold onto their shapes. Bolts of fabric plummet from above to transform the stage into ever-shifting landscapes. A long row of weighty books leaps from a high shelf to undulate to the floor in the snakelike configurations of a Slinky toy. Uninhabited clothes appear as vividly alive as the animate actors. The members of a boredom-plagued dinner party metamorphose into a screeching flock of exotic birds. And don't even try to imagine what can happen to a simple block of wood. . . How, after all, do actors, trapped in the too, too solid flesh of human bodies capture a world view that insists, as one of Schulz's characters puts it, that 'the migration of forms is the essence of life,' a style that anticipates the magical realism of Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez? (*New York Times* 18 July 1998).

The actors capture that world view by inhabiting a theatrical state that is defined by a constant and restless metamorphosis, where minimal props (a table, a stack

of books, a chair) are transformed to represent almost anything imaginable, where actors manipulate items of clothing like puppets, where suggestion and metaphor are accepted as the norm, and above all, where the actors' own bodies seem not limited by physical law. Jeremy Kingston, in his 1992 review in *The Times*, describes another moment of bird imagery, where the actors manipulate the leaves of books to suggest the movement of wings: "In true Complicite fashion, since Joseph's Father takes a mad delight in his aviary, the books become flapping birds, held aloft in the performers' hands. A flock of birds sweeps over the stage, sending Joseph in flight before them" (*The Times* 15 August 1992).

In context, the actor and book as bird in flight image metaphorically references not only Joseph's flight into literary fantasy, but also the flight from oppression of Poland's Jews, clinging to vestiges of their intellectual tradition. It was, for me, a strikingly original, highly theatrical, and deeply powerful metaphor that melded seamlessly with one of the thematic currents that informs the piece: that every aspect of the physical world is in flux, in a constantly shifting and morphing tango, led by a sometimes grim political reality, but partnered, by virtue of imagination, with the fantastic.

Complicite's passionate political engagement enhances the metaphoric power of its work. *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol* recounts the experiences of peasant life from a pronounced Marxist perspective, with a clear nod toward the heart-breaking inequities of class. In the case of *The Street of Crocodiles*, Rush

Rehm points out that in representing the imaginative, fantasizing protagonist's death by a single Nazi gunshot, "Complicite contrasts Schultz's liberating animism, which transforms objects into living beings, with its fascistic opposite, a literal-mindedness that systematically converts humans into inanimate objects, ready for the ash heap" (1995: 95).

Mnemonic

I attended two performances of *Mnemonic* in 2001. It is a production whose very purpose, Ben Brantley observed in his New York Times review, was "to draw you into its world of seemingly endless empathy." It was a production that employed a formidable arsenal of technically complex imagery, yet as Brantley observes:

> Yet always at the center of this phantasmagoria is the solid flesh of the human body. 'What does nakedness remind us of?' a woman's voice asks. We have already felt, if not articulated, the answer before the answer comes: 'Seeing a naked body of any age we remember our own' (*New York Times* 29 March 2001).

In addition to its intentional evocation of empathy, *Mnemonic* is a vivid example of the ways in which Complicite creates and makes use of theatrical metaphors. It is a production that elicited from me a response of theatrical wonder. A close examination of two representative moments in that production serves to

underscore how embodied metaphor perceived in an empathetic field relates to the generation of that wonder.

Mnemonic is a tightly constructed work in thirty-eight brief scenes, which explores the fragmented nature of memory, especially as it relates to identity; meditates about origins, especially within the context of European history; and investigates the chaotic structures of emotional need. It accomplishes this while developing two narratives: the scientific attempts to account for the origins and movements of a five-thousand-year-old "Iceman," whose body was discovered preserved in 1991 in the Italian/Austrian Alps – and the desperate efforts of a young woman to locate the father she never knew, long presumed dead, but now believed to be alive and somewhere in Europe. Both narratives are filtered through a character, Virgil (played by director Simon McBurney), who is fascinated by the "Iceman" story and is also the despairing lover of the woman (Alice) who has left him to seek her father. The play is performed by seven actors, all of whom, except McBurney, who plays only Virgil and the body of the Iceman, take on a dizzying assortment of characters.

The company lists a bibliography of several dozen works that were used as points of reference in developing *Mnemonic*. But no discussion of its sources can capture the *mise en scene* of this production. On one hand, the scenic elements are quite simple. They consist of two translucent plastic curtains, a cleverly designed collapsing chair, a bed, a table, a television monitor, a stone, a sink and mirror unit, and an assortment of hand props. These elements are

constantly transformed, however, both technologically (as when they become a surface for projections) and by actor manipulation (as when the chair becomes a puppet). The lighting scheme is extremely complex, involving hundreds of cues, a variety of projections, haze and air-moving fans. The sound design is similarly complex, involving seamless transitions between recorded and live amplified sound. Again, there are scores of cues, ranging from simple voiceovers to dense sound collages. Video, both live and recorded, is a frequent factor on the television monitor. In its imaginative, theatrical use of video, Complicite evokes some of the groundbreaking work of The Wooster Group, but the unique aspects of Complicite's work consist of the complex interweaving of scenography and the spoken word with the bodies of the actors. They are constantly and expressively in motion – using movement techniques derived from mime, clowning and other forms of embodied theatrical expression. There is always a remarkable precision and clarity to the images they create with their bodies, enabling the lightning quick transitions from scene to scene that we encounter in *Mnemonic*. The images created by the bodies of the actors compliment and parallel images created in the spoken text. In the context of this production, the bodies of these performers are transformed into metaphors in motion that demonstrate the connections between all of us and our ancestors, the connections between pursuit and flight, and the connections between emotional need and the need for survival.

I want to scrutinize two segments of this performance, the beginning sequence and the end sequence, for the insights such scrutiny might yield about a calculated effort to evoke empathy, the use and impact of embodied metaphor, and the capacity of these production elements, acting in concert, to engender wonder. And I want to consider how the Lecoq training received by founding members of the company may be manifested in these performance segments. McBurney and Complicite chose to begin this performance without the mask of character and by engaging the audience directly.[8] I recall the opening of *Mnemonic* like this:

Simon McBurney (as himself) appears on a stage bare except for a wooden chair and a large rock, and addresses the audience with a microphone in a long and humorous monologue about the current status of research into the phenomenon of memory. While explaining the science, he alludes to the chair as being full of memories, having belonged to his father, an archeologist, and being one that he has used as a prop in many plays. He sits in it and it collapses. He warns the audience to turn off their cell phones and then asks them to don the sleep mask and hold the leaf that has been placed under every seat in the auditorium. The stage goes black, and he leads the audience in a memory exercise which culminates in an attempt, using the network of veins on the leaf,

[8] Interestingly, the most recent effort of Complicite to be mounted in the United States, a co-production with the Japanese company, The Setagaya Public Theatre, entitled *The Elephant Vanishes,* also begins with a direct address to the audience by a Japanese "stage manager," who informs the audience that technical problems have delayed the show. We quickly realize that her announcement, salted with witty observations about the use of technology in theatre, is in fact the beginning of the show. Here, as in *Mnemonic*, the audience has been directly engaged as a device to disrupt their expectations and render them more alertly open to the initial moments of the production. A condition of complicity has been achieved.

to visualize an almost endlessly multiplying series of ancestors until as McBurney's disembodied voice points out, everyone in the theatre is related to everyone else. The audience is instructed to remove its blindfolds as lights come up, revealing McBurney in a different costume, now as the character Virgil, who like us is removing his blindfold and listening to the monologue of McBurney (now a recorded voice). Virgil's cell phone rings and embarrassed by the intrusion of the cell phone into the theatrical event, he "exits" from the theatre while talking to an unidentified man and trying to explain the monologue about memory.

It is only as the next scene begins with scenic elements rushing onstage to represent Virgil's residence, and we see him, again on the telephone, discussing the mysterious departure of his lover Alice, that the action proper of the play commences, but the first "scene" serves as a monologue that introduces many of the themes that will preoccupy us throughout the evening: the way that memory conditions the present, the mysterious ways that one phenomenon morphs into another, and awareness of the interconnectedness of humanity as a means of stimulating an empathetic and intersubjective response. And in each case, the themes are served up with a nod to a self-conscious, highly physical theatricality, an aesthetic in which the actors' bodies are foregrounded, and a ready sense of humor.

The Influence of Lecoq

In the case of Complicite, a consistent emphasis upon the inventive, disciplined, and metaphoric use of the body as a staple of theatrical communication is clearly traceable to the Lecoq training that the founders of Complicite share. Franc Chamberlain notes that Lecoq's insistence on the body as the single foundation of all theatrical expression represents a direct rebuke to the Cartesian mindset that separates the body from the thinking process and continues to dominate Anglo-Saxon theatre. "Lecoq says: 'l'homme pense avec tout son corps' [man thinks with his entire body] and this fundamental position means that when he seeks the initial point of movement he also seeks the impetus of thought and meaning" (11).

A more extensive review of some of Lecoq's training principles and techniques reveals some of the ways in which his influence is made concrete in the work of Complicite. Upon his death in 1999, the New York Times obituary described Jacques Lecoq as "an extraordinary teacher of mime," but to reduce Lecoq training to the study of mime, even endowing mime with the most expansive of definitions, is to seriously misunderstand the breadth of his theatrical scope. Simon McBurney, the artistic leader of Complicite, writes in his foreword to Lecoq's *Le Corps Poétique* (published in English as *The Moving Body*): "What he offered in his school was, in a word, preparation – of the body, of the voice, of the art of collaboration (of which theatre is the most extreme artistic representation) and of the imagination. He was interested in creating a site to build on, not a finished edifice" (Lecoq ix).

Lecoq's pedagogy certainly evolved over time, but it was always ambitious. Leabhart reports that an undated flyer for the school listed the following areas of study: "sensitizing of the body to space; analysis of movement; the dynamism of forms and colors; an organic approach to words; sound transfers; the drama of constructed spaces; playing of passions, states and situations; gauge of the body; dynamic objects; spatial structures of the body; portable architecture; animation; masquodrome; video; projects" (92). Such an expansive list of techniques and practices, many of which are described somewhat idiosyncratically, suggests a complex and bewildering curriculum.

Lecoq, himself, however, has reduced his principal pedagogical concerns to two: improvisation and movement analysis. Improvisation, for Lecoq, is a means to foster creativity and invention. He is careful to distinguish creativity from expression. Expression, for Lecoq, is an activity undertaken for the benefit of the actor doing the expressing. Creativity, on the other hand, suggests a relationship between the actor and a group of spectators (Lecoq 18). This focus on spectators and the world external to the actor is a central tenet of Lecoq's pedagogy: "In my method of teaching I have always given priority to the external world over inner experience" (19). This focus on the external world and the spectator is a significant feature of Complicite's work and helps to account for the exuberant theatricality of that work – and, in turn, its capacity to engender wonder by consciously engaging the horizon of that spectator.

Movement analysis, for Lecoq, has to do with the dynamics of movement. "The laws of movement have to be understood on the basis of the human body in motion: balance, disequilibrium, opposition, alternation, composition, action, reaction. These laws may all be discovered in the body of the spectator as well as in that of the actor. . . The audience forms a collective body which recognizes life, or the lack of it, in a performance" (21). Lecoq's conception of movement, and his focus on its dynamics, is broad enough to govern all theatrical circumstances. He specifically refers to a piece of writing, for example, as a structure in motion (ibid). Lecoq's project was to create a theatre artist training regimen (he often observed that his techniques were intended for directors, writers, and designers, as well as actors) that emphasized an embodied form of creative expression that targeted the interest of spectators in a dynamic, physical, and constantly shifting theatrical context. If the concept of movement is itself endowed with metaphoric properties sufficient to include writing (and virtually any other aspect of theatrical endeavor), it is not surprising that the application of the concept by Lecoq yielded a technique that was itself highly dependent on metaphor, as a rich semiotic bridge created between the body of the actor and the imagination of the spectator.

In an insightful and nuanced consideration of Lecoq's training principles, Simon Murray identifies three related qualities that are central to Lecoq's notion of the artist who is prepared to be creative: *le jeu, disponibilité,* and *complicité.* He crudely translates these terms as "play or playfulness; openness or

availability; and rapport or a spirit of the 'accomplice'" (2003: 65). These principles serve as a necessary set of preconditions for the practical techniques used in Lecoq training. I suggest that these principles are an integral part of Theatre de Complicite's aesthetic, well represented in *Mnemonic*, and warrant consideration in some detail. They comprise what Sauter would call the artistic elements of Complicite's performances, the theatrical conventions and principles, the particular pleasures that help to constitute the horizon of a Complicite performance text that a spectator engages when she seeks to meld her own horizon in a fusion of understanding.

Play is a rather elastic term for Lecoq. According to Murray, Lecoq defined play as the capacity of the actor, fully aware of his theatrical circumstances, to shape an improvisation for some spectators (ibid). Play is therefore a handy category of theatrical activity that encompasses the concerns of Lecoq already mentioned. But the concept of play as Lecoq uses it also suggests a high level of acquired technical proficiency and a sense of spontaneity or presentness. Philippe Gaulier, who taught at Lecoq's school before establishing his own training program, characterizes play as involving a sense of pleasure and lightness in the work that is quite unrelated to the genre or content of that work (66). The pleasure of play is equally important in the performance of a tragedy as in a commedia-inspired romp, because it is concerned with the processes of theatrical creation in its broadest sense. Lecoq, himself, in describing the course of study in his school, which included work

investigating clowning, commedia, and tragedy, is quite explicit in attributing the highest importance to play in his conception of theatrical invention:

> My method aims to promote the emergence of a theatre where the actor is playful. It is a theatre of movement, but above all a theatre of the imagination. In the course of the second year, we shall not just aim to see and recognize reality, but to imagine it, to give it body and form. Our method is to approach the 'territories of drama' as if theatre were still to be invented (Lecoq 98).

Certainly, in the performances of Complicite that I have attended, a sense of pleasure in and playfulness about the theatricality of the presentation is almost palpable. In an earlier essay, Murray points out that "[p]lay is therefore a dynamic principle which informs the quality of interaction between performers and with their audience, but also opens up possibilities for action which can liberate the actor from the 'literalness' of the text and enrich it with additional (physical and visual) meaning" (2002: 34). In other words, Murray identifies the concept of play as one which is directly implicated in Lecoq's insistence that the performer claim imaginative space of his or her own quite outside the restraints represented in more traditional theatre practice by the twin authorities of text and director.

I want to expand Lecoq's insistence on the value of play to argue that it also represents a circumstance conducive to wonder, but I need to make that

argument in the context of the other two aspects of Lecoq's formulation of the triad of features necessary for creative theatricality: *disponibilité,* and *complicité*. While the word *disponibilité* resists precise translation, Lecoq uses it to suggest a state of openness and receptivity on the part of the performer, not in the sense of emotional availability, as might be emphasized in a program devoted to a Stanislavsky-based technique valuing psychological realism, but in the sense of being prepared to respond physically and imaginatively to whatever stimuli are present in the moment. As always, for Lecoq, the answers to theatrical questions are to be found in a disciplined awareness and use of the body in motion (Murray 70). A performer in this disciplined state of readiness is primed to embrace the spontaneous and unpredictable, words not only descriptive of improvisational practice, but also directly implicated in the pursuit of innovation and originality.

The notion of *complicité* is equally important. It is, of course, no accident that this word, implicated as it is in Lecoq's pedagogy, was adopted by Theatre de Complicite as a company name. (In English-speaking literature, the company has chosen not to use the accented "e" in the word complicité.) Complicite has discussed its use of the word in the program for *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol* as signaling a theatrical approach conceived as "a form of collusion between celebrants." Murray observes that this phrase reveals much not only about the working style of Complicite, but also something about the sense in which Lecoq used the word, involving both his high regard for ensemble as a fundamental form of theatre practice and the nature of the performer-spectator relationship.

> Here, I sense, that *collusion* suggests something much more than the anodyne and neutral 'working together' or 'cooperation'. There is something slightly dark and suspicious about the term, implying perhaps a landscape where rules and laws are transgressed, and where boundaries are extended – not for some wicked purpose, but in a spirit of shared, gleeful pleasure. . . Here, too, we are led back to Lecoq's fundamental belief in 'the pleasure of play' (71).

Le jeu, disponibilité, and *complicité* are fundamental aspects of Lecoq's understanding of the spirit of imaginative theatre, a province of disciplined playfulness, where the performer's receptivity and technical flexibility are necessary precedents to the experience and a gleeful collusion between actor and audience is a result of that experience. While these principles underscore Lecoq's philosophical approach to theatre training and creation, his actual techniques are the means by which the principles are realized. While his rigorous two-year training program embraces a variety of practices and disciplines, two techniques seem especially important in understanding the work of a Lecoq-inspired company like Complicite: the neutral mask and the *auto-cours*.

The neutral mask, in Lecoq practice, is a blank mask worn by the student in various exercises intended both to enable that student to experience the state

of neutrality prior to action and to lend greater emphasis to the expressiveness of the body (Lecoq 36-38). A state of neutrality, according to Lecoq, is "a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict" (36). It is a practical training tool in this sense that, in its encouragement of receptivity, is closely related to the principle of *disponibilité* and the capacity to play. "Beneath the neutral mask the actor's face disappears and his body becomes far more noticeable. Talking to someone, you often look that person in the face. With an actor wearing a neutral mask, you look at the whole body. . . Every movement is revealed as powerfully expressive" (38). By emphasizing the body as the primary expressive instrument of the performer, work with the neutral mask is intended to empower the performer by elevating movement as a medium of expression to coequal status with the voice and the face.

The concept of neutrality is central to Lecoq's work, and in the regular curriculum of his training program, many months are spent in its cultivation. Neutrality may be understood as an "energized awareness, which is pre-expressive" (Martin 61). That state of creative tension is the starting point for play, for the creation of character, and for all improvisation (ibid). Murray comments that "wearing the neutral mask encourages students to find a pure economy of movement which is uncluttered by extraneous social patterns and habits, and which invites them to explore a sensual and physical relationship with the world and its matter" (73). I believe the work with the neutral mask does something more. By encouraging the unlimited expressive capacity of embodied

presence, the training empowers the performer and paves the way for the use of the body in constructing unusual metaphors. By virtue of its implicit assertion of simplicity as a precursor to elaboration and complexity, it invites the spectator to supply meaning within the context for the movement that is otherwise supplied by the narrative. It is a recipe for actively engaging the imagination of the audience in appreciating metaphor, as when a flapping book becomes the fluttering of wings, and therefore directly pertinent to the consideration of wonder.

Auto-cours is the term Lecoq applies to a ninety minute session, held each day, during which students work together in fashioning a performance based upon a theme suggested by faculty but without any direct supervision by faculty. The performance is presented to the entire school at the end of each week (Lecoq 91). Unlike other exercises in the curriculum, which focus on improvisation and the individual actor, the work of the *auto-cours* emphasizes production, playwriting and intensive collaboration (ibid). It is a structured way to deflect attention from the individual to the group. "[T]he *auto-cours* quite rapidly leads to the emergence of different roles in the creative process: students discover strengths as directors, authors, actors" (94). The centrality of this practice was instrumental in paving the way for Lecoq-inspired companies like Complicite to proceed with ensemble-derived work. "Confidence bred from Lecoq's weekly *auto-cours* fed the company's founder members with a belief that, rather than having to rely on existing play scripts, they could collectively create their own texts for theatre" (Murray 97). A question that arises from an

affinity for ensemble-derived work is whether that practice tends to foster the creation of more imaginative work that is somehow more conducive to the generation of wonder. *Mnemonic* is such a creation.

Mnemonic **Continued**

Some of the ideas absorbed by McBurney (and other Complicite principals) while studying with Lecoq are very much in evidence during the opening sequence of *Mnemonic* that I described above. There is a note of theatrical playfulness throughout, in the substantive content of McBurney's opening monologue, in the comically collapsing chair, in the theatrical legerdemain that enables McBurney the actor to transform into Virgil the character listening to McBurney the actor, and in the gently induced participation of the audience. This use of the audience actually recalls not only the playfulness that Lecoq theorized was central to the actor/spectator relationship, but also evokes the corollary principles of *disponibilité* and *complicité*. Instructing the audience to don blindfolds and engage in memory exercises not only introduces an important theme; the blindfold aspect of the game also makes the audience receptive to the McBurney/Virgil transformation and, by implication, prepared for more theatrical fun. Moreover, by addressing the audience directly, by enlisting its participation in an event, and finally by including it in an "in" joke about theatrical representation, McBurney and company have created circumstances of collusion with the audience and a complicity in all that is to follow.

It is worth noting, too, that by depicting Virgil in a comically embarrassing light – as disrupting the performance with his cell phone – spectators are invited to appreciate his human failings and more pertinently perhaps, to identify with the character. Who of us have not been embarrassed by an inappropriate noise for which we have been responsible? This is an intentional tactic. As the performance develops, it becomes clear that we are expected to empathize with Virgil. Indeed, the operation of empathy becomes a recurrent preoccupation of the production.

The actor McBurney appears throughout *Mnemonic* as both Virgil, the central character, and also as the remains of the recently uncovered iceman, the investigation of which serves as the second primary narrative of the production. In both roles, McBurney is nude throughout most of the performance. His body becomes a focal point in a broad spectrum of critical enterprises embedded in the play, especially in terms of marking identity and thinking about experience (in this case the similarities and differences in lived experience between Virgil and the Iceman). This points to a significant dimension of the Complicite aesthetic.

> When we look at bodies – including our own – we see more than just flesh, hair, blood, muscles and so on. We see personal biography, the marks of suffering or happiness, and the imprint of class, gender, race and all those other characteristics and dispositions that make us who we are. This is an insight – an understanding – that lies at the heart

> of any theatre which chooses to foreground bodies, gestures and movement in its practice (Murray 39).

But here, McBurney's nakedness is part of a deliberate strategy to evoke empathy. While *Mnemonic* is devised by Complicite from a large number of sources, as well as the improvisations of the company, special attention is focused on particular sources, including material written especially for the production by John Berger.[9] In the published text of *Mnemonic*, for which the authorial credit is simply "devised by the company," an appendix is included comprised of passages identified as source material that inspired and informed rehearsals. One such passage is by Berger, written specifically for the production process. It reads, in part:

> Seeing a naked body of any age or either sex, we remember our own, and the contact of our own from birth onwards with other bodies. Such contacts were tactile: they involved touching and being touched. They were also metaphoric for they were a demonstration of the similitude of all human bodies. Temperaments, imaginations, minds vary enormously. Bodies vary too, but minimally. Each body is unique – every mother knows that. But all bodies have so

[9] Berger's novella *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol* was the primary source for Complicite's earlier work of that name. It is also interesting to note that Berger is the author of *Ways of Seeing*, a book about the perception of art that, among other things, offers a scathing political analysis of the way that the nude female figure has been exploited by males throughout art history. In the passage written for *Mnemonic*, Berger has moved from consideration of the female body as a sexualized object to consideration of a gender-neutral body as a site of empathy.

> much in common. More than we habitually remember until we see one naked, or until we deliberately touch one another. The similitude, however, is not a conclusion but a starting point. It is where empathy begins. It is how one can put oneself in somebody else's place (*Mnemonic* Appendix).

Complicite's strategy in pointedly invoking empathy is intended to support its thesis, articulated repeatedly in various ways throughout the production, that all humanity is bound together in an intricate web of relationships that occur not only in a contemporaneous global way but also through time. This fundamental insight, first expressed overtly by McBurney at the beginning of the performance in the context of asking the audience to associate the veins of a leaf with their own ancestry, is expressed more theatrically in the final moments of the performance, in a movement sequence involving embodied metaphor that, for me at least, engendered a sense of wonder.

In the final scene of *Mnemonic*, Virgil stands naked imagining that he is in conversation with his absent lover. As her image fades away, he stands alone and speaks in an echo of the passage Berger wrote for the company:

> There is nothing innocent about the naked. Only the newborn are innocent. Seeing a naked body of any age we remember our own. Putting ourselves in someone else's place, in the gully for example 5,000 years ago.

> *He climbs on the table evoking the dual image* [of both Virgil and the Iceman] *we have seen throughout the piece. . . The other cast members appear silently behind the table and hold up the metal frame of the Iceman's refrigeration unit in front of them. . . we begin to understand they are looking at him not with mere ghoulish curiosity, not in horror, but with empathy* (*Mnemonic* 71-72).

The company then begins a sequence wherein, one by one, an actor slips under the frame and, rolling on to the table, takes the place of the "Iceman" who in turn moves back to the group. This process becomes faster and faster until we see a dynamic process of bodies tumbling and rolling over each other, evoking a never-ending cycle of generations succeeding each other. This rapidly moving metaphor, composed of bodies in coordinated motion is rendered more abstract by a change in lighting, whereby the sequence becomes backlit and is seen in silhouette. Finally, the sequence changes, and as the table glides offstage, the cast forms a straight line downstage.

> *They lean forward as if about to take a step. Their silhouettes briefly evoke the photographs of Muybridge.*[10] *From standing they lean back as if assessing the size of a mountain in front of them. Suddenly their heads snap sideways. What have they seen? The gully? A parent?*

[10] Eadweard Muybridge was a pioneer of stop-action photography in the 19th century, who gained world-wide fame for his studies of bodies in motion.

> *The future? The audience now becomes aware of a huge projection of the Iceman, emerging on to the back plastic* [a kind of cyclorama stretched across the upstage portion of the stage]. *The company turns towards it. They walk upstage towards the body of the Iceman. Before they get there …* (ellipses in original)
> *Fade to black* (73).

On the two occasions that I saw performances of *Mnemonic*, on successive evenings, the audiences sat in stunned silence for several long moments, before bursting into appreciative and sustained applause.

Engaging Wonder

On the first evening that I observed the performance, I was totally swept up in the imagery created by Complicite, and as I absorbed these final moments, that churning engine of humanity, I found myself experiencing a complex combination of emotion and delight, a real sense of the kinship I shared with the bodies on stage and all that they represented, and an intense pleasure occasioned by my appreciation of the artistry that had achieved the images to which I was responding. I was seized by a moment of wonder. On the occasion of the second night of performance, I was more detached, watching with analytical appreciation but with a significantly reduced emotional engagement. On this occasion, wonder was replaced with profound admiration.

I have theorized that wonder is a phenomenon of theatrical reception in which the delighted or awed apprehension of a novel stage metaphor, especially one that is embodied, occurs within a field of empathetic or intersubjective exchange. My experience on the first viewing of the end sequence of *Mnemonic* was entirely consistent with that theoretical speculation. The specter of tumbling and rolling bodies, gradually increasing in tempo, as a metaphor for the evolution of humankind over time and an acknowledgment of its interrelatedness, was both playful and viscerally powerful. I was delighted at its inventiveness and a little awed by the precision and physical virtuosity required for its execution. Clearly the metaphor was composed (in a way that Jacque Lecoq would have enjoyed) of nothing more than actors' bodies, contextualized by the meaning of the piece they had created and the effort of the spectator's to supply meaning to it. The company was self-consciously seeking to invoke empathy throughout the performance, initially by means of our identification with the Virgil character and eventually by virtue of the attitude of the company evinced in its final regard of the Iceman. This is a clear example of the theatrical generation of wonder – for me.

I do not believe that critical sophistication is a necessary prerequisite for appreciating the techniques of Complicite. Much of the company's work is highly complicated. In some ways, however, virtuosity in performance is recognized simply because its apparent difficulty is self-evident. The broad appeal of the modern circus performer in a Cirque de Soleil performance, for example, is a

product of nifty production values, but also of the jaw-dropping acknowledgment on the part of spectators that the performers are capable of feats that the spectators cannot replicate. It is the time-honored appreciation of the acrobat; in the context of theatrical performance, it is a vindication of Meyerhold's insistence on the necessity of popular entertainment three quarters of a century ago; and it is an implicit recognition of the role of intersubjectivity in theatrical reception.

I believe that the power of Complicite's final metaphor is amplified by virtue of its embodiment, that metaphors constructed from the human body have a particular impact as a result of that uniquely corporeal source. This follows from a consideration of the nature of perception in circumstances when that perception is informed by a conscious desire to understand. In other words, when consciousness is placed in the context of a hermeneutic project, the very operations of that project impart special potency to consciousness of embodied communication.

Merleau-Ponty asserted that "consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body" (138-139). He, in fact, "(re)claimed the centrality of the lived body and embodied experience as the very means and medium through which the world comes into being and is experienced" (Zarrilli 2004: 655). The essential embodiment of consciousness or perception has been well established in fields as various as neuroscience (see, for example, Antonio Damasio's *Descarte's Error*) and cognitive linguistics and philosophy (Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh*). These insights have been passionately

embraced by theatre theorists engaging performance from a phenomenological perspective. Stanton B. Garner, Jr. engages the perceptual complexity of regarding the body of the performer in a theatrical context. For him, the body on stage is a complex amalgam of the actual (indisputably present, fully available to the senses of the spectator) and the fictional (functioning as a signifier of character, often in a constructed narrative). Therefore, even before considering the implications of the focused, desiring gaze of the spectator, there is a layered ambiguity, a "twinness" to the phenomenon of the body presented for theatrical consumption.

> Considered one way, the actor's body is eclipsed, denaturalized by the character's fictional presence . . . But the body asserts a much more fundamental and intrusive actuality into the field of dramatic representation, an actuality that charges even verbal reflections (and evocations) of bodily presence. A point of independent sentience, the body represents a rootedness in the biological present that always, to some extent, escapes transformation into the virtual realm (Garner 44).

Even more than the inherent ambiguity of the actual and fictional body, the issue of theatrical perception is exponentially complicated by the dynamics of the relationship between audience and performer. Phillip Zarrilli points to the

complexity of a dynamic in which the actor's own experience is necessarily part of a reception equation:

> The actor's body, therefore, is dually present for the objective gaze and/or experience of an audience, and as a site of experience for the actor per se. The actor's body is a site through which representation as well as experience are generated for both self and other (2004:664).

The spectator's embodied gaze is entirely capable of being returned (at least theoretically) by the actor, from an entirely different site of experience, creating the conditions for an exchange of embodied perception. This exchange, a necessary consequence of the proximity between audience and performer and the liveness of the performance, sets up conditions of intersubjectivity and has the capacity to alter the performance in any of the familiar ways that audience response impacts the actor.

Using Sauter's description of the audience's quest for meaning at a theatrical event as one in which the spectator's contextual horizon must join the horizon of the text (or performance phenomenon) that the spectator is seeking to engage and understand, a theoretical accounting for the special power of embodied metaphor emerges. The spectator, occupying the intersubjective field of embodied perception that is integral to theatrical watching, appreciates the artistic skills manifested in the inventive and virtuosic use of the body by a company like Complicite in an abstract way, but also there is an additional

dimension of appreciation flowing from the implied comparison of the events on stage with the spectator's own physical capacities, the spectator's own horizon of experience with respect to her/his own body.

This process may be described, too, in terms of a Ricoeur dialectic, transforming interpretation into a dynamic that engages both the distanciation of the performance text and the appropriation of that "text" by the spectator, where the tension between the spectator's appropriation of the image of embodied possibility represented on stage and the distanciation that is a result of the spectator's pre-existing knowledge of her/his own body and its limits yield a synthesized new level of understanding and therefore appreciation. Put another way, in the intersubjective field that is theatrical reception, the appreciation of a performing body is conditioned by the tension between otherness and familiarity. We make reference to the knowledge of our own bodies to make aesthetic judgments about other bodies. In Ricoeur's understanding of intersubjectivity as a mechanism by which worlds are reconfigured and reimagined (Hahn 283), the embodied metaphor is elevated to a perceived phenomenon of unusual appeal. Perhaps this is why Bert O. States speculates that certain images distinguished by their corporeality and their capacity to be immediately absorbed by the senses occasion a response of delight (10), a response that I have related to wonder. Certainly, there was an element of delight in the reaction of the audience to the performance of *Mnemonic*, a reaction notable for its collectivity.

The Politics of Wonder

I have speculated that there is, potentially at least, a progressive political value inherent in the production of wonder, a value associated with imagining a better world. The humanist message of *Mnemonic*, emphasizing as it does the interconnectedness of all humanity, might seem to represent an example of that, especially if that message reverberates throughout a large portion of the audience, creating a fleeting moment of communitas, a utopian performative.

> In this momentary, mindful, present-tense "doing," audiences and artists entangle themselves in each other's longings, in an intangible but palpable connection of human beings, gathered somewhere, together. Utopian performatives recognize the artfulness of the moment; they revel in the artifice of the theatrical with an emotional knowingness that insists that through feeling together, we are moved, and change might happen (Dolan 2004: 60).

My own experience on the occasion of that first performance of *Mnemonic* was one of emotional recognition, of perceived possibility, and above all, of hope – hope for the theatre and hope for humanity.

There are critics, however, who remain skeptical about some of the political implications inherent in the company's work, especially in a work like *Mnemonic*. Janelle Reinelt, in an article exploring the place of performance in the struggle to determine the character and parameters of the "new Europe,"

engages *Mnemonic* and finds it wanting. She argues that much of the struggle for what it means to be European will be fought around issues of identity formation. In this context, she considers precisely the same climactic sequence in *Mnemonic* that I have described above, but she is troubled by the extent to which the image of actors substituting for the body of the Iceman makes a "'family of man' statement, linking everyone in an image of sameness. The problem is that white Europeans (for all the characters are white) represent all humans who are, it is implied, essentially similar in their travels, their struggles to survive, their bodiliness" (376). ReineIt is accusing Complicite of embracing a universalism that fails to account for difference and otherness and is therefore, politically deficient, or at least suspect. She is, in effect, branding *Mnemonic* as a humanist performance text that fails to adequately acknowledge diversity, multicultural perspectives and identity locations outside the largely male, Eurocentric world that is depicted therein.

The objections to claims of universality (and the humanistic philosophy that informs any articulation of the universal), so well established both in the academy and in progressive political thinking, have themselves been questioned recently by an impressive array of critics who are identified with progressive points of view. The notion of collectivity, inherent in a humanistic perspective, is politically powerful, perhaps even necessary to meaningful political action in a world that attempts to reconcile discrete cultural locations with common problems. George Lakoff, in his book *Moral Politics* for example, argues for a

metaphoric understanding of political rhetoric that rests upon claims of cross-cultural universality in parenting archetypes. Terry Eagleton has pointed out: "Hostility to the universal is scarcely bad news for those whose interests would be threatened by talk of human rights and connected global struggles" (20). Eagleton agues that "humanity has never been so forcibly united in the face of the same military, political, and ecological threats" (ibid). Jill Dolan, in her work on utopian performatives, observes that "[t]he sympathetic connectedness we feel in performance . . . can provide ways back to each other, back to some productive rearticulation of a more radical humanism" (2004:15). It seems to me that progressive visions of the world are increasingly embracing a perspective of the universal, especially with respect to human rights, if only as a tactic in moving an agenda that serves the broadest possible constituency.

Edward Said, in his last book *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, launches an impassioned defense of humanism in literary criticism, while observing that "schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language-bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past . . . and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present" (11). For Said, the value of humanism is precisely in its capacity to move from the spheres of the private to the public, to engage humanity in its commonality. And while Said's remarks are directed to the reception of literature, his insights are equally applicable to other forms of expression.

> Humanism, I think, is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social space, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again, as we encounter our own silence and mortality – all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation (83).

It is interesting to note, in light of the importance that I have attributed to the influence on Complicite of Lecoq, that Lecoq, too, has been criticized for his embrace of the universal. Indeed, his expressed intention, especially with regard to the use of the neutral mask, is to rediscover the "universal rules of theatre" (Murray 2003:156). Murray acknowledges that Complicite shared with Lecoq a propensity for invoking a spirit of universality, "an ethical preoccupation with the power of theatre to break down barriers, to act as a unifying force" (2003: 109). He describes Complicite's work as representing a "fusion between the politics of internationalism and the politics of imagination" (ibid). What a company like

Complicite has achieved in *Mnemonic* is a means of imagining a European experience more united by what it shares than splintered by its differences.

Reinelt, even while articulating her objections to the imagery of *Mnemonic*, eventually acknowledges that "while perhaps the content of the play is not very bold, the attempt to work with an epistemology of performance that uses feelings of recognition to piece together new linkages may be experientially powerful . . . the liberal humanism of Complicite, embedded in theatrical innovations of physicality and memory, may go some way to interconnect with a range of both popular and high cultural practices in the service of a more progressive image of a New Europe" (386). In other words, the imaginative theatre practice of Complicite, coupled with feelings of empathy may produce something both powerful and progressive. Robin Kelley writes that the best progressive social movements fulfill a function similar to great poetry, transporting us to a place where we can imagine a new society. He calls that act of imagination "poetic knowledge" (21). For me and for many in the audience of which I was a part, whose appreciative response was readily apparent, Theatre de Complicite in *Mnemonic* served up a generous helping of poetic knowledge. The experience was both an affirmation of theatrical wonder and a gesture toward its importance as a political force.

Chapter Three

Harry's Way: Searching for Wonder in Retrospect

I have already discussed Meyerhold briefly in the context of his insights about audience reception and the extent to which he anticipated contemporary understandings of the performance event as an occasion in which the audience and its reaction "completes" the performance (Braun 256). Meyerhold was much more than a performance theorist, of course; as a practitioner he helped to establish a production style of exuberant theatricality that offered an alternative to the illusionistic psychological realism championed by Stanislavsky. By example, he helped to establish the modern understanding of the director as an *auteur*. In terms of my own work, he provided inspiration for a particular production that, in retrospect, represented my earliest effort to experiment consciously with both theatrical metaphor and empathy as discrete conceptual constructs. My theatrical experiment had nothing to do with a hypothesized experience of theatrical wonder. Rather, I was seeking a theatrical style that would create a sense of aesthetic and critical distance in my audience, even while entertaining it with the broadest of comedic flourishes. In the process, however, I learned that certain elements in a theatrical event, especially excessive familiarity with a metaphor and a too-successful effort to alienate the audience, are impediments to the generation of theatrical wonder.

In 1997, I mounted a production at Riverside Theatre in Iowa City of a new play by Keith Huff, entitled *Harry's Way*, a disturbing yet genuinely funny black comedy about domestic violence, which mounted a critique of unconditional love. This production involved a directorially imposed style that rested upon an extended metaphor related to the traditional Punch and Judy puppet show and simultaneously explored the notion of invoking empathy for two characters who might ordinarily be dismissed respectively as reprehensible and pathetic. In his discussion of typologies of mise-en-scène from a semiotic perspective Pavis describes a "theatricalized" mise-en-scène as one which "instead of imitating the real, the signs of performance insist on play and fiction, and an acceptance of the theater as fiction and convention; for example, the mise-en-scènes of Meyerhold" (212). *Harry's Way* was such a production; it self-consciously engaged Meyerhold's idea of the "theatre of the grotesque" in that it embraced an exaggerated theatricality and used a style informed by my study of the commedia dell'arte. It was a production that, for me as a director, marked an interest in a more flamboyant theatricality than my work had ever previously manifested. I can recall few other productions in which I thought so actively and recurrently about audience reaction. In a sense, it was the first instance in which I consciously used my practice to address theoretical issues, in this case, issues revolving around audience reception. And it represented an odd combination of intuitive stabs about the implications of style coupled with a conscious attempt to marry one aspect of Brechtian theory to my practice, that of seeking intellectual

distance. At the time, I had not conceived of theatrical wonder as a phenomenon that I could articulate and explore, yet, in retrospect, this production seemed to encapsulate many of the criteria I have associated with wonder.

Theatrical Time Travel: Interrogating the Past

It is, of course, challenging to look back over a gulf of seven years to mount a retrospective analysis of an ephemeral production, particularly when my chosen method of analysis involves my own insights as a participant observer. I must access those insights by means of a process of remembering. It is possible in part because of the availability of a video record of the production, along with various press clippings and other written documents. It is possible because I am able still to consult with many of the participants. But it is possible especially, because my recollection of the production, the conceptual birthing of the production, and the rehearsal process is unusually vivid. In part, this is because of my affection for and attachment to this production as a risky but generally successful theatrical enterprise.[11] In part, it is because every step of the process was articulated to an unusual degree among my collaborators and communicated to various people, including the public at large, outside the ordinary circuits of production conversation. For these and various other reasons, I recall the process of creating this work with greater clarity than any number of plays I have directed in more recent years. I am cautious, however,

[11] By generally successful, I mean that at least portions of its audiences seemed to receive the production in the manner that I had intended. I am not measuring success in this case either by the critical response, which was quite positive, nor the box office proceeds, which were somewhat disappointing.

about claiming too much veracity for my recollection. I am exquisitely aware that memory is an unstable and uncertain domain, characterized by a process of selection and reconstruction. I offer these caveats in advance, lest some of my descriptions seem too unequivocal. Yet I am also mindful that memory is an inextricable part of all perception, including that which is contemporaneous. Henri Bergson, anticipating phenomenological analysis, wrote that "there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience" (24). Much of my present thinking about theatrical wonder is flecked with memories about *Harry's Way*. Like much of the theoretical technique used throughout this project, and like the hermeneutic process described by Paul Ricoeur, memory represents a negotiation between distancing and embracing, between cognitive and affective relationship with various "facts" summoned for critical consideration. If memory has value, it is a value achieved through a dialectical process that is similar to that which seeks understanding, a fusion of that which is recalled with that which is understood in the present. The tension between past and present is not the only manifestation of a serious duality in my conceptual spectrum.

My effort to theorize about this production is an attempt to achieve what Bert O. States called "binocular vision," a perspective on theatre analysis that investigates the complimentarity of semiotics and phenomenology, that marries a capacity to see the world significatively and referentially with a capacity to see the world (or the theatrical event) phenomenally, as a holistic, embodied, and,

therefore, highly personal experience (1985: 8). Stanton B. Garner cites this synthesized approach to theatrical analysis with approval, arguing that the phenomenological critic, by virtue of this dual perspective, can "maintain broader awareness of signification as the essential other dimension of the perceptual object" (15). Both States and Garner suggest that the theoretical dialectic represented by a phenomenological approach that nevertheless acknowledges the place of the sign presents the possibility of engaging the theatre event as an embodied communicative experience that engages the artist and spectator both in a complex transaction, the study of which can make productive, dialogic use of a range of theoretical projects. I approach *Harry's Way* through my own experiential lens and also through an analysis of the ways in which its system of signs were interpreted.

As I look back upon the experience of *Harry's Way*, and especially upon my own observations of audience reaction, I find myself concluding that, for *most* spectators, despite various pleasures and values that might have been generated by their engagement with this production, theatrical wonder was not among them. The reasons why I think this is true, however, suggest a further refinement of what criteria are necessary to create or evoke wonder. Bernard Beckerman, in his *Theatrical Presentation: Performer, Audience and Act,* distinguishes between simple and complex responses by the audience. Simple responses are not ambivalent. They can be intense, even overpowering, but they are single in effect. Complex responses, on the other hand, may be

understood as “the simultaneous experiencing of two contradictory simple responses. Instead of being overpowered by emotion, feeling may be tentative, subject to qualification, contingent and unresolved” (74). In Beckerman’s sense of the phrase, I believe that theatrical wonder is a simple response to an image in an empathetic field, a sense of awe or delight that is unified and not qualified by various contingencies.

States takes up the notion of delight in a way that is directly pertinent to me here. Describing the quality of delight as a kind of “wrappedness in the image” that occasions the reaction, States writes that “there is a playful tug-of-war in the image between the useful and the delightful. Usefulness implies the image’s transitivity, its sign-ness, or convertibility into social, moral, or educational energy; delight implies its ‘corporeality’ and the immediate absorption by the senses” (1985: 10). In *Harry’s Way*, the usefulness of my imagery overwhelmed the corporeality to which States makes reference.

I will argue that a metaphor of unusual duration and constant perceptual presence, especially one that is sustained during the entire duration of the production, like that in *Harry’s Way*, generates both a complexity of response and a kind of familiarity on the part of the audience that tends to undermine the sense of discovery and delight that other more limited metaphors generate. The absence of delight and the absence of discovery are impediments to wonder. Moreover, I believe that the aesthetic distance sought and achieved in this highly stylized production, in order to facilitate a consideration by the audience of the

ideas of the play, made an empathetic response to reprehensible characters less likely, and, therefore, undermined the empathetic field that is a necessary condition for the generation of wonder.

A Production is Conceived: Channeling Mr. Punch

Keith Huff wrote the first draft of *Harry's Way* in 1992. It was substantially revised in 1994, and that version of the play served as the foundation for the production we undertook at Riverside Theatre in 1997. *Harry's Way* is a dark comedy with a quirky theatrical sensibility, which uses a plot revolving around the circumstances of domestic violence in a particular marriage to probe the limits of rationality and the liabilities of unconditional love. It also offers a scathingly satirical view of the inept attempts by various social agencies and social actors to interrupt, punish, or publicize the abuse depicted in the play. *Harry's Way* charts, in unflinchingly humorous terms, the painful marriage of Harry and Harriet Caliban[12]. Harry is a brute, a self-absorbed man prone to the physical and psychological abuse of his wife, whose compliant behavior tends to enable Harry's darker impulses. She is unabashedly portrayed as a somewhat hapless victim, both of Harry's brutality and of her own unwillingness to take any steps to protect herself from his abuse, despite the varied efforts of those representatives of the larger social world, and even Harry's own brother, to offer interventions

[12] Harry's surname is an intentional reference to Shakespeare's famous "man-monster" in *Tempest* and a gesture toward semiotic signification. As Marvin Carlson points out: "In the highly concentrated narrative world of the drama, the names given to characters potentially provide a powerful communicative device for the dramatist seeking to orient his audience as quickly as possible in his fictive world" (1990: 26).

that might alleviate her dire circumstances. In this three-actor play, the actors playing Harry and Harriet are joined by an actor designated as "The Other," who morphs into the various other comedic incarnations of the people (of all descriptions and genders) who enter Harry's and Harriet's lives: a doctor, a priest, a domestic abuse activist, a psychiatrist, a parole officer, Harry's brother, a crusading journalist, and Harry's mother. The play is uncompromising in its insistence that Harriet loves Harry. Even at the conclusion of the play, in one of its most disturbing moments, after Harriet has shot and killed Harry, she is prone to romantic and ambivalent daydreams about him.

Keith and I were graduate students together at the University of Iowa, where I had directed a number of his plays. We were also (and remain) close friends. Both of us had had active professional lives in the theatre before entering Iowa's MFA program, and Keith had experienced considerable success as an emerging playwright, having had four or five of his scripts produced at well-known regional theatres. While we were in school, *Harry's Way* had received concrete expressions of interest by several notable theatres. It had received a major reading at the Public Theater in New York and an extended developmental workshop by the New York Theatre Workshop. Yet despite the oft-expressed admiration for the play, these and other theatres had ultimately declined to produce it. I was convinced that these theatres were dissuaded from production because the play was politically unpalatable, in that it required its audiences to laugh at the brutality of this marriage and appreciate Harriet's inexplicable

affection for Harry. I believed that for the play to work well, spectators needed some kind of aesthetic distance that would activate the comedy of the play. They also needed to empathize with Harriet not only to the extent that they could appreciate her pain, but also to the extent that they could appreciate her illogical love for Harry. For me, the play was deeply provocative and deserving of production.

By that time, I had begun my long directorial association with Riverside Theatre in Iowa City, and I approached its artistic directors about producing the play, promising that I would be sensitive to its political pitfalls and take appropriate steps to use the production as a platform for a community dialogue about the issues raised within it. They agreed to produce the play in their 1996/1997 season.

We all expected the play to be controversial. For obvious reasons, domestic violence is not usually seen as fodder for comedy. Iowa City audiences tend to be well-informed, actively political, and generally devoted to progressive causes, and if we created the impression that we were insensitive to the plight of battered women, critical reaction was likely to be vocal, passionate and condemnatory. We were, of course, not embarking on this project to affirm our lack of sensitivity. Committed to seeking a way of simultaneously honoring the script and avoiding the trivialization of its subject matter, I sought the participation of some professional counselors from the Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP), a local women's shelter. After reading the script, the DVIP staff

professed considerable skepticism about the tone of the play and its attempt to find humor in a situation that they dealt with on a daily basis with the utmost seriousness, but they agreed to consult with me about the issues presented in the play and to participate in several public discussions that were scheduled to follow performances.

Along with my primary collaborators, especially my scenic and lighting designer, Bryon Winn, and my costume designer, Margaret Wenk, I struggled with the task of finding a way to present the play in such a way that the humor could survive the repellent behavior depicted, a task which required preserving the possibility of finding Harry entertaining in some way, and allowing the ideas of the play to surface for an audience. As I studied the script, I became aware of an apparent analogy between the character Harry and the popular British puppet Punch of Punch and Judy fame. While the story of Punch has been interpreted and reinterpreted over several centuries, the basics of his story have remained remarkably consistent (Bell 2000: 22). The correlations between Harry and Punch were striking. Like Punch, Harry was a brute who beat his wife. As in *Harry's Way*, in the most traditional *Punch and Judy* scenarios, various outsiders sought to intervene in Punch's life (a constable, a magistrate, eventually Satan himself). In the typical *Punch and Judy* scenario, Punch in a fit of temper, tosses his infant child out a window. In *Harry's Way*, Harry is accused of causing Harriet to miscarry. Punch is usually depicted as carrying a slapstick cudgel; Harry is fond of carrying (somewhat inexplicably) a big stick. The correlations between

Harry and Punch were truly striking, all the more so because Keith maintained not only that he did not intend any such comparison, but that he was generally unfamiliar with the specifics of *Punch and Judy* performance traditions.

As I thought about Punch and his centuries old popularity, certain notions became especially prominent. Part of Punch's popularity seemed to relate to the indomitability of his spirit and his class position, that as an everyman of sorts, or at least a representative of the common man, he was resistant to (in fact, defiant of) authority figures who sought to control him. He has functioned in the popular imagination as a kind of endearing icon of anarchy. Above all, he was a puppet, as were his victims and his antagonists, metaphoric and signifying nods to humanity but sufficiently removed from the realm of the actually human so as to render his behavior amusing rather than disgusting. We can laugh at Punch because he is not real, and nothing about the circumstances of his performance suggests reality other than the anthropomorphic form of the puppets. But can a puppet stand for something more than amusement? Something more politicized or implicated in a social dialogue? The Bread and Puppet Theater, as just one example, has been described as a "complex mix of avant-garde forms, political ideals, populist aspirations, and a definite desire to present an alternative to mass-media, capitalist culture" (Bell 2001: 56). The artistic leader of Bread and Puppet, Peter Schumann, has suggested, with his tongue only partially in his cheek, that puppets are subversive '[b]ecause the meaning of everything is so ordained and in collaboration with the general sense of everything, and they,

being only puppets, are not obliged to this sense and instead take delight in the opposite sense, which is the sense of donkeys confronting the existing transportation system" (49).

I became more and more accustomed to thinking of Harry as Punch. I did not think deeply then about the implications of treating the characters of the play as performing objects. It is only in retrospect, as I think about the ramifications of embodied performance, that I recognize some of the liabilities of this conceptual strategy. I will take up a consideration of how the objectification of these characters may have simultaneously elevated the importance of metaphor even while sabotaging the likelihood of generating a significant empathetic engagement by the audience later in this chapter. At the time, however, the puppet show metaphor was irresistible.

Eventually, with the cheerfully trusting acquiescence of the playwright, I conceived the play as a human Punch and Judy Show; a tactic which I believed would create enough aesthetic distance for the audience to allow a consideration of the play without a knee jerk reaction of revulsion and rejection. The concept ultimately informed not only the style of performance – but also the scenographic and costume design of the show.

My research into the Punch and Judy tradition inevitably led me to general research about the commedia dell'arte. Indeed, the puppet show, by the late nineteenth century, was probably the last residual manifestation of the commedia dell'arte (Segal, Harold 40). The character Punch is derived from the mask of

Pulcinella (Bell 18), one of the servant zanni whose antics gave to the commedia dell'arte its distinctive exaggerated comedic character. Somehow, I made the leap from Punch to the grotesque theatricality of Meyerhold, especially in productions like *The Fairground Booth* (which I will discuss below), and the combination of these two sources guided all our production plans.

Both Bryon Winn, my scenographer, and Margaret Wenk, my costume designer, embraced the idea of a puppet show, but after a great deal of discussion, we collectively determined not to realize the metaphor literally. Instead, we chose to create a theatrical environment that gestured to Punch and Judy, but also to the commedia tradition from which it sprang, along with the overt theatricality and aesthetics of a vaudeville show. After much discussion with the playwright and the design team, we settled on three different ways of creating that environment. Merleau-Ponty argues for a unified understanding of sensory perception. We were seeking a multi-faceted evocation of our metaphoric concept that would engage spectators on a terrain of both visual and aural stimuli, an environment that blended information without need for explanation. "The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea" (Merleau-Ponty 235).

First, with regard to scenic design, Bryon created a whimsical box of a set, painted in vibrant, pink and blue child-like colors, that was reminiscent of a puppet theatre. The flats that composed it were only eight feet high so as to

reinforce a diminutive, playhouse like quality. The only furnishings were a table and two chairs, in the same pink and blue palette, all constructed in larger-than-life proportions. The effect of the furniture was to reduce the actors, making them seem somehow more constructed and doll-like. Built into one stage left flat was the door to a sort of cupboard. Any and all props required by the actors magically appeared in this cupboard whenever they were needed. The props themselves were selected or built to suggest a sense of whimsy. The rifle which figures prominently in the second half of the play, for example, was a wooden toy gun, painted in the same vivid colors as the set. Other props, a recurring Twinkie, for example, was outlandishly oversized and rigged to spurt a cream-like substance (shaving cream) when squeezed. Bryon's lighting scheme included the use of a follow-spot and footlights, both intended to reaffirm the overt theatricality and vaudevillian sensibility of the production.

Second, Margaret's costume design reflected the various influences that informed the production concept as well. Harry and Harriet wore exaggerated makeup that suggested a clown-like sensibility without resorting to the literalness of whiteface. Their costumes were brightly colored and exaggerated. When Harry was incarcerated, for example, he wore a comical, striped prison uniform. Harriet's basic costume featured a harlequin-inspired diamond pattern on a short dress worn with tights. Margaret's most inspired work though was reserved for the various characters played by the third actor identified as the Other. Some of these costumes included masks as an intentional nod to our commedia dell'arte

inspiration, but these were masks that typically were worn on the side of the actor's head so that the audience was able to see his own features, but in profile, he revealed a different face. Some of the characters had surreal touches. The character of Lydia, who was the representative of an organization that (ineptly) championed battered women, not only wore a profile mask, but sported a business suit that included a third breast on her right shoulder. The appearance of these characters often produced laughter in production before they opened their mouths.

The third environmental aspect of the production represented an even more radical departure from the script. Early on, I had determined that sound would play an important role in this production. I envisioned not only transitional music of a type consistent with the production concept to move from scene to scene, I had embraced the idea of using sound to punctuate comic moments, especially moments of physical or slapstick humor. I envisioned literally scores of these sound cues. After some discussion with Keith, we decided to add what amounted to a fourth performer, an actor who would always be visible to the audience (and selectively to the other characters) through a scrim at the upstage center portion of the set. This performer, played by Sean Williams, provided all the sound effects live, using a keyboard synthesizer, and a generous assortment of sound and noise-making devices that ranged from slide whistles and horns to rattles and maracas. He never spoke, though he sang both at the beginning and the end of the show. The process of working these sound cues into the

production was exacting. I had scored the script to indicate each placement of an effect. On each of those occasions, we had to select or devise an appropriate sound and then rehearse it with the actors so that we could achieve a seamless precision that would not interrupt the flow of the action. At the beginning of the show, before we began the scripted portion of it, Sean appeared looming over the top of the upstage flat to sing a broadly comic version of "I'm Just Wild About Harry." His appearance looming over the set created an impression of him as a sort of puppet master, fixing our initial metaphor in the minds of our audiences. (At the conclusion of the show, he would reprise this song, now sung in a slower, more reflective, even mournful tone.)

The net impact of these production elements established a sense of whimsical theatricality and called forth our puppet theatre/vaudeville show metaphor with considerable clarity. These ideas were carried over into the actual style of performance.

The Production: Shades of Meyerhold

I assembled a cast that I thought would be flexible and technically skilled enough to undertake the kind of production I envisioned. As Harry, I cast Dato Bakhtadze, an MFA candidate at the University of Iowa's acting program, who had traveled to Iowa City from the Republic of Georgia to pursue his education. Dato was a skilled performer, trained in Georgia in a program that emphasized physical acting and specifically acknowledged a link to Meyerhold's training

techniques. He is a charming, burly man, who I thought might find a likeable side to Harry. Dato's casting represented something of a gamble in that his accent (which, of course, was read by most people as Russian) was so thick I was concerned about his intelligibility. As Harriet, I cast a Los Angeles actor, Mary Sullivan, with whom I had worked several times before. I knew her to be highly methodical and competent, though her training and background were exclusively in a psychologically based realistic acting style. For the challenging role of the Other, I cast Stephen Thorne, another graduate actor from the University of Iowa with exceptional comedic skills and a knack for making bold choices that I thought would serve the daunting task of creating the eight broad characterizations that the script required.

I was especially interested in working with my actors to achieve performances that were resistant to easy categorization. In exploring the relationship between actor and audience phenomenologically, Bert O. States describes three pronominal modes by which the actor may address an audience: the self-expressive mode (characterized by the pronoun "I," or the actor); the collaborative mode (associated with the pronoun "you," referencing the audience); and the representational mode (using the pronoun "he," gesturing toward the character) (160). While I had not read States at the time I directed *Harry's Way*, his description of these three modes of acting captures the complexity of what I was seeking in performance. In the self-expressive mode, the actor seems to be performing on his own behalf, to demonstrate that of which

he is capable (161). In the context of this production, I associate that mode with an essential aspect of the commedia-like performance values I hoped to achieve: expressions of technical skill and performative virtuosity that were entertaining in their own right, moments in performance that called attention to the individual skill of the actor.[13]

The collaborative mode is one in which the actor uses some form of the "you" address with respect to the audience; it is both an overt acknowledgement of the presence of the audience and a presumption that the audience is somehow complicit in forging a collective response to events on stage (170).[14] There were already moments in the script when actors made comic asides to the audience, but I had discussed with the playwright my intention to create more of these moments. At the time, I was primarily interested in cementing the theatrical style of the piece by ignoring the fourth wall and subverting any vestige of naturalism. In retrospect, however, I recognize that this impulse could also have had significant effect with regard to the way that the audience engaged these characters, especially Harry and Harriet. The use of the technique set up a condition of the dialogic confirmation and mutuality of awareness that I have argued is associated with intersubjectivity. Without being able to theorize it at the

[13] I want to emphasize that my appropriation (or imitation) of commedia techniques was limited to performance style. I made no attempt to depict the characters of *Harry's Way* as the stock characters so well associated with commedia traditions.

[14] States argues that this is a form of address typically present in comedy and melodrama, but absent in tragedy, which he characterizes as a non-collaborative form that "creates an empathic experience wherein we are dissolved in what could be called a magnificent loneliness . . . What the audience shares in such moments, and in the play at large, is less important than what isolates each spectator in the experience" (171). I disagree with his implication that a collaborative form is not likely to create an empathic experience, but I will return to his insights about tragedy in the chapter on Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*

time, I had intuitively stumbled into a strategy for trying to create theatrical circumstances that might elicit empathy for characters who might otherwise be seen as repulsive or (in Harriet's case) pathetic. As I will discuss, I had not considered the complication of objectifying the characters, by virtue of their association with puppets, as it related to the generation of empathy.

The representational mode is, in State's formulation, closely aligned to the narrativity of most theatre, "the shared sense that we come to the theater primarily to see a play, not a performance" (181). It is the dramatic key of theatrical presentation that enables the actor to become a character in order to tell a story. This is, of course, the mode that most clearly corresponds to methods of acting that involve mimesis and to our most commonplace assumptions about the embodiment of character. States observes that in practice, these distinctions of acting modes are not as neatly discrete as their definitional elaboration. Acting is a processual undertaking in which these various modes may melt into a perceptual synthesis. Certainly, as I approached the beginnings of rehearsal for *Harry's Way*, I envisioned performances that would meld these various distinctions into an appetizing performative stew.

I attempted to apply much of my commedia and Meyerhold research in rehearsal, seeking a broad comic and frankly theatrical style of acting. We worked improvisationally with wildly exaggerated mask exercises. We spent days exploring the physical performance of stereotypical characters without dialogue, fashioning a comically distorted dream ballet with the assistance of

choreographer Mauria Brough. We developed comic and acrobatic combat sequences punctuated by whimsical sound effects and outrageous lazzi (the bits of comic business associated with commedia techniques) - ranging from a cake glued to a platter that could be inverted to an oversized ejaculating Twinkie. And even though I was hardly breaking new ground (in fact, I was following a well documented and historicized modernist, avant-garde trajectory), the work was a practical revelation to me. It had a spontaneity and unabashed theatricality that entertained even while broaching the most sensitive subject matter. I hoped that the audience (at least in large part) would be seduced into deferring judgment long enough to consider the ideas embedded in the play. For me, the rehearsal experience forged a deep respect for commedia techniques, not simply as a fascinating bit of theatrical history, but as a vital means of evoking the very essence of theatricality with highly contemporary applications.

While the specific origins of the commedia dell'arte in sixteenth century Italy remain obscure, historians agree that the first clear reference to a commedia performance is in 1568 (Brockett 143). During the next two centuries, Italian commedia troupes performed throughout Europe, many of them achieving considerable fame. Wherever they went, these troupes left a vibrant theatrical legacy, influencing native actors and writers (148). The prominent features of commedia practice during its most popular period are readily identifiable. They include the use of virtuoso improvisation, well-cultivated stock characters whose masked performance emphasized movement, and inspired comic business.

Historically, the commedia dell'arte is also notable as an example of the rising professionalism of actors in Europe and as an institution that helped to popularize the appearance of women on stage. None of these features in and of themselves, however, account for the intense resurgence of interest in commedia by artists in the twentieth century.

> Although some nineteenth century dramatists, artists, composers and writers had been drawn to commedia characters and images, at the beginning of the twentieth century, almost simultaneously, an astonishingly diverse group of playwrights, actors, directors, and designers rediscovered the art of commedia in ways that would permanently change the modern theatre. Luigi Pirandello, Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, and Jacques Copeau, among many others, sought liberation from the pervasiveness of Realism, as well as the stale remnants of elaborate spectacles, overwrought melodramas and artificial acting styles of the previous century (Fisher 10).

There is certainly no universally held conception of commedia that informs all of the artists cited by Fisher. Indeed, each of them appropriated different aspects of commedia (and to different extents) in their own work. What remains extraordinary, however, is that such a diverse group of artists could produce such a diverse creative output while acknowledging a common influence. A potential

explanation of that phenomenon requires a more searching analysis of the commedia spirit. Martin Green and John Swan argue in *The Triumph of Pierrot* (1986) that there is something about the moods and tone of commedia, a recognition of the essential duality of life, that was especially resonant in the early part of the twentieth century, a time when the imagery and associations of commedia characters were especially appealing to the imaginations of modernist artists. "These moods can all be described as consciously brittle. They include both gaiety and sadness, both exhilaration and terror, depending on the aspect of life encountered; but all commedia moods are characterized by a readiness for reversal, an insecurity about their source, a moral self doubt – by a sense of the artifice of all emotion" (xiii).

I believe that in focusing on the propensity of commedia to embrace duality (love and hatred, humor and despair, certainty and doubt) in a self-consciously and exuberantly theatrical manner, Green and Swan have identified precisely those qualities of commedia which informed my own production of *Harry's Way*. Moreover, they are the qualities which inspired Meyerhold in his modernist attempt to overcome realism with something more vital.

Meyerhold was not the first twentieth century Russian artist to make use of the commedia dell'arte. Stravinsky made use of the commedia derived character *Petrushka* (a Russian variant of Pedrolino) in his ballet of the same name in 1910. "However, the major stimuli toward the use of commedia dell'arte in Russia in the early twentieth century came from abroad, for native sources did

not offer the rich variety of motifs, plots, images and masks that could be found elsewhere" (Pietropaulo 117). Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* was performed in Russia for the first time in 1893, and Aubrey Beardsley's drawings of Pierrot had been widely distributed in the early 1900's (118). In a specifically theatrical realm, the theorizing of Edward Gordon Craig, which directly challenged realism while simultaneously casting a backward glance to earlier more vital theatrical forms (especially commedia and puppetry), was profoundly influential on Meyerhold and many others (Fisher 107). Clearly, the European renewal of interest in commedia had begun, and it was manifesting itself in a transnational way in a variety of art forms. There is no debate, however, that Vsevolod Meyerhold was primarily responsible for integrating the ideas of traditional commedia performance into a new Russian theatrical practice that was to be extremely influential in its own right.

Meyerhold was a founding member (as an actor) of the Stanislavsky/Nemirovich-Danchenko company which became famously known as The Moscow Art Theatre. But despite his close associations with these theatrical leaders and his considerable acting success, Meyerhold chafed under the restrictions of naturalistic theatre. Having left the Moscow Art Theatre and having rejected Stanislavsky's emphasis on psychological realism in 1902, Meyerhold undertook a new career as a director/actor. Among his earliest efforts was a production of an obscure Austrian melodrama about circus life, *The Acrobats*, in which Meyerhold played the role of an aging and failing clown

modeled on the character Pierrot (Braun 30). He had begun a far-ranging exploration of commedia as a source of contemporary theatrical inspiration. For Meyerhold, the commedia dell'arte "seemed the ideal antidote to the theatre of emotion and the naturalistic play, and it also spurred the actor towards physical, movement-based performance" (Leach 10).

In 1906, Meyerhold played Pierrot again in Alexander Blok's play *The Fairground Booth*, a production that has come to be seen as a landmark event in the articulation of a new and revolutionary form of modern commedia (Green and Swan 85). The play, adapted from Blok's own poem at Meyerhold's suggestion and using the milieu of the fairground as a controlling metaphor, offered a fragmented sardonic picture of a spiritually exhausted world and a critique of the symbolist aesthetic that had preoccupied many in the Russian avant-garde - including, for a time, Meyerhold himself (Braun 73). But the production is remembered now less for its substantive content than for its overtly theatrical style – especially its style of acting.

> The abrupt changes of mood, the sudden switches of personality, the deliberate disruption of illusion, the asides to the audience, all demanded a mental and physical dexterity, an ability to improvise, a capacity for acting not only the part but also one's attitude toward it. These devices were all waiting to be rediscovered in the tradition of popular theatre stretching back to the commedia dell'arte and beyond. It

> was this theatre, the theatre of masks and improvisation, which the experience of *The Fairground Booth* led Meyerhold to explore. It came to furnish his entire style, a style which in a word can be called 'grotesque' (Braun 74).

Harold Segal points out that Meyerhold drew not only upon the commedia dell'arte for his inspiration in creating *The Fairground Booth*, but also specifically on puppet traditions, demanding a box set reminiscent of a puppet theatre within the larger set and treating the traditional commedia characters of Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin as human puppets (227- 229).

For Meyerhold, the embrace of this "new" style of performance required a far different kind of training than that which he had experienced himself under Stanislavsky, and while he is best known now for his invention of bio-mechanics (after the Russian Revolution), even his earlier organized studios for actor training emphasized a wide variety of skills, including physical agility and acrobatics, musical proficiency, mime, the basic principles of improvisation as practiced in the commedia dell'arte, and the application in the modern theatre of the traditional devices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Leach 49-50). Clearly, he was embracing a model for the contemporary actor that owed a great deal, especially with respect to the pursuit of virtuosity, to the great commedia performers of the past. He wrote, quite explicitly, that

> The public comes to the theatre to see the art of man, but what art is there in walking about the stage as oneself? The

> public expects invention, play acting and skill. But what it gets is either life or a slavish imitation of life. Surely the art of man on stage consists in shedding all traces of environment, carefully choosing a mask, donning a decorative costume, and showing off one's brilliant tricks to the public – now as a dancer, now as the intrigant at some masquerade, now as the fool of old Italian comedy, now as a juggler (quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold* 130).

In the years after *The Fairground Booth,* Meyerhold created an alter ego named Dr. Dapertutto to continue methodical experimentation in theatrical form and training. Those efforts yielded occasional productions, even as Meyerhold staged larger works under his own name. One of the most frequently performed productions of that period was *Harlequin, the Marriage Broker* (1911). Meyerhold wrote that this production was created with the specific aim of reviving the theatre of masks, based upon his studies of the scenarios of the commedia dell'arte and based upon the art of improvisation. He cautioned that the actor's freedom to improvise was limited by his obligation to adhere to the overall "score" of the production (Braun 121). Green and Swan point out that even in his most famous productions (*Magnanimous Cuckold, Mystery Bouffe, The Bedbug, The Bathhouse,* and his famous transformation of Gogol's *The Inspector General*), many of which had no overt thematic or imagistic references to commedia, and many of which advanced political agendas consistent with Meyerhold's

emergence as the leading post-Revolution director of “proletarian theatre,” his actors were expected to meet the demands of this “grotesque” style, demonstrating physical virtuosity, improvisational skills, the ability to play types or masks, and the capacity to offer ironic self-commentary (100). (It is worth noting that this latter theatrical technique bears more than a passing resemblance to Brecht’s roughly contemporaneous “alienation effect,” though Meyerhold’s version had no specifically political or didactic objective.) Even after the Russian Revolution, Fisher argues that many of his most obviously political plays retained both an emotional power and the power to entertain through his use of “the comedic notion that characters can be seen as depersonalized human symbols” (124).

Meyerhold is often cited as a model of the “auteur” stage director. *Harry’s Way* marked one of my first directorial efforts in which I took significant liberties with the playtext that I was staging, staking my own claim to the *auteur* mantle. I was extremely excited and energized by the rehearsal experience, but as Meyerhold would have suggested to me, my work was incomplete until an audience received, engaged, and completed it. Moreover, any consideration of the techniques of this production, steeped in the use of metaphor and conscious attempts to evoke empathy, as being generative of theatrical wonder rests upon the response of spectators.

The Reception of the Production

I want to acknowledge a series of difficult issues as I examine the experience of *Harry's Way* in performance. I have already mentioned the issues posed by a retrospective examination after a period of seven years. There are other issues as well. I have announced an intention to use Wilhelm Sauter's techniques for analyzing performance. His taxonomical description of aspects of theatrical communication as *sensory, artistic* and *symbolic*, as well as his description of Gadamer's hermeneutical process of achieving understanding or interpretation (82-88), is, I believe, extremely useful. In fact, it represents a practical working model of the dual semiotic/phenomenological perspectives that I want to theoretically embrace. His technique of examining audience reception, like most semiotic theorists, however, is predicated on the response of a single spectator as opposed to the collective body that is an audience. Patrice Pavis argues that such an approach, by positing an "ideal" individual spectator, ignores the ideological plurality of a theatre audience and the status of any individual audience member as "someone at an intersection of ideological and cultural tensions and contradictions" (28). This is a fair critique, but it does not follow that insights gleaned from such an analysis are without value. On the contrary, the information derived from such an investigation, while requiring rigorous interrogation in order to situate its own subjectivity and acknowledge the very plurality that Pavis mentions, does in fact yield a description of an understanding of the perceived event. That (selectively individual) understanding does not

represent the end of research or offer a totalizing account of the event being scrutinized. Rather, it provides a provocative platform for thinking about it. The goal here is not to "prove" a proposition, but to engage it critically and to examine the potential of the performance in question to generate specific reception phenomena, especially as reception relates to techniques of staging.

The idea of a model spectator, according to Marvin Carlson, is derived from Umberto Eco's formulation of a model reader and Marco de Marinis's extension of that idea to theatrical circumstances, transforming the reader into a spectator. Carlson offers an intriguing elaboration of this analytical strategy by observing that "the modern theatre provides a striking example of this hypothetical construct in an actual person, the director, who watches the development of a performance from the seat of a presumed spectator and orchestrates the effects as such a spectator is expected to receive them" (1990: 12). Here, I believe is an articulation of why the director, assuming an interrogation of his own subjectivity, is peculiarly well positioned to render a theoretically productive autoethnographic account of theatrical reception with regard to a particular production.

Pavis also describes a need for a theoretical approach to performance that will account for both reception *and* production (the final product of a mise-en-scène and the roots of its elaboration).

> This conception of production-reception promotes an interactive strategy of productive and receptive instances

> that we should seek to produce as creators and to receive as spectators. Such a strategy prevents us from slipping back into the debate about the intentionality of the artist producer and the subjectivity of the spectator-receiver. It reminds us that the answer lies in neither one nor the other, but in their mutual seduction (as opposed to reduction) (27).

In this case, the spectator whose reactions are examined is not only a composite of audience members I have observed or with whom I have entered into dialogue, but me as the director/observer, well acquainted with all the circumstances of production and certainly unusually competent to consider the relationship between intention and result. The application of Sauter's phenomenological/hermeneutical analysis in this case is not only descriptive of a slice of performance. It is an attempt to create the kind of discursive practice about which Pavis speculates, where practice is retroactively seduced by theoretical inquiry so that theory may prospectively enable the realization of theatrical desire.

I want now to offer a description of the penultimate scene of our production of *Harry's Way* and then examine that scene through the mechanism of Sauter's performance analysis, which seeks to provide accounts both of modes of perception and the process by which understanding is achieved. Perception (of metaphor) and understanding (through empathy) are, in my hypothesis, necessary antecedents to theatrical wonder. I have selected this

scene because it was cited by some spectators in conversation with me as one of the (few) moments in the play when they responded emotionally to both Harry and Harriet. I am keenly aware that the extraction of one or two theatrical moments from the global experience of the play as a whole may skew critical reaction. I am attempting an analogue to the kind of analysis the anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick description," a detailed "local" or partial analysis, by means of which a "global" or synthesized account of the larger work may be discerned or inferred (28). Such an approach is entirely consistent with the phenomenological focus and the attention paid to specific facets of performance that characterize my argument. "[T]he phenomenological attitude chooses the perspectival over the universal; it seeks to ground the general in the local instance" (Garner 5).

First, a set-up: In the second half of *Harry's Way*, Harry and Harriet have fled the authorities pursuing them. Both of them in comically cross-dressed disguise, they have taken a Winnebago into the wilds of the Yukon territory, where it crashes in the midst of an Eden-like wilderness. There, Harry and Harriet set up housekeeping and seem to be enjoying some rare moments of violence-free contentment. Their wilderness is invaded, however, by Leonard, an unctuous and obsessive journalist, who has been crusading for Harry's punishment and simultaneously seeking to seduce/rescue Harriet. He is captured by Harry and eventually, Harry beats him to death with his stick in what (as staged) is a highly stylized moment accompanied by a cacophonous

symphony of synthesized percussion. Harry prepares to leave the wilderness which has been his haven, but Harriet, horrified by the violent death she has witnessed, refuses to follow him any further.

Harry, still an outlandish figure in an oversized bright green and black dress, stands at a distance from Harriet. He sports an exaggerated bit of make-up, a forehead appliqué signifying a wound where Leonard has previously struck him. Harriet is cowering on the floor downstage, where she fell during the struggle with Leonard. The footlights lend an eerie, grotesque quality of light to the scene. She is wearing vivid orange men's coveralls over her clown dress, and sporting an obviously fake, luxuriously curled moustache. Her hair is styled in a redhead burlesque of a forties style with a sweeping pompadour in front that flows into a long mane at the rear of her head. Her make-up, as always, features kewpie-doll lips, deeply rouged cheeks, and thickly painted arched eyebrows that impart a look of perpetual surprise. "You told me once you'd follow me to the ends of the earth," Harry whines in slightly surprised indignation. Harriet replies with a shouted, if rather shaky, courage, "I DIDN'T THINK YOU'D ACTUALLY TAKE ME THERE!!" Harry pauses, turns his head to the audience, and says with familiar affection, "What a grouch" (75). He walks across the length of the stage to Harriet, kneels beside her, and touches her with some measure of tenderness. Then suddenly, his hands close around her neck and he begins to strangle her, her legs flailing at odd angles. Just as suddenly he releases her in horror. She chokes and gasps and withdraws from him. Once again, Harry

looks to the audience as he quietly says in an apparent effort to make light of what has just occurred, “Sorry. Too many Yukon gooberberries” (75).

As he reaches, in apologetic tenderness, for Harriet, who is whimpering, she pulls away from him. As he attempts to apologize, she calls him an animal, and screams through her tears for him to get away from her. He looks at her for a long moment, and then picks up the rifle from the oversized table on which it rests. Despite the fact that the rifle is a toy and painted pink, it has a realistic bolt action, which Harry now operates as if to chamber a round of ammunition. The sudden authentic, metallic sound is in marked contrast to the whimsical sound effects we are accustomed to hearing and instantly creates a sense of the ominous. Harry pauses again, then looks to an audience member. He holds out the rifle, inviting that person to take it. When there is no response, he repeats the offer to another audience member, then another. Finally, he shakes his head in apparent disgust at the unwillingness of the audience members to take action. He finally leaves the rifle with Harriet, still huddled on the ground, touches her with tenderness and gentleness, picks up his stick, and slowly exits stage left. She cries out after him, piteously begging him not to leave her. He does not respond. There is a brief blackout, and we hear a shot.

The lights come back up, focusing intensely on Harriet. She rises, and looking at the audience, ceremoniously removes her moustache and coveralls. Restored to her previous clown-like costume, she tells us about Harry’s death by rifle shot, and through her tears, which glisten in the harsh glow of the footlights,

recalls the red stripe of his blood on the white snow as his lifeless body slid down a hill.

Sauter's notion of the sensory aspect of theatrical communication relates to all those elements of embodied performance, both physical and psychological, perceived by the spectator as part of the phenomenon of her reception. The scene under consideration was intentionally loaded with contradictory information. Here, the make-up and fanciful costuming helped to sustain an awareness of the comic dimension of the actors' performance. The emotional intensity of the scene, however, in terms of Harry's homicidal rage and Harriet's suddenly "real" vulnerability and despair, stood in stark contrast to that comedic sensibility. The mood of the piece had abruptly shifted from the prior slapstick battles, accompanied by sound that would not have been out of place in a Three Stooges episode, to a theatrical representation of violence in which victims really could die, and the only sound, until the threatening sound of the rifle's bolt action, was the sound of physical struggle. Suddenly, the audience observed real tears. The movement by the actors was suddenly less stylized and more suggestive of actual behavior. I was seeking by this rupture in the spectrum of sensory reception to facilitate an identification by the audience with the characters, to mount a surprise attack on spectator expectations established over the prior course of the performance in order to generate empathy.

As Sauter has suggested, the various aspects of perceived communication interlace, so that the physical change in the actors' movement

may also be understood as reflecting the artistic level of communication, which includes both encoded and decoded information, and which includes the appreciation and critical judgment of the spectator with regard to the skill of performance. Here the actors' skillful embodiment of a commedia dell'arte inspired style has been subverted by their unanticipated resort to a more naturalistic mode of mimesis. Ironic commentary has been replaced, for the most part, with the kind of immediate emotion with which many people recognize and share as a dimension of their own lived experience.

Sauter's third aspect of communication, the symbolic, allows for the impact of prior knowledge and accumulated information that, when coupled with present perception, allows for interpretive or associational leaps, and potentially for empathy with fictional characters. Here, the audience had eighty or ninety minutes worth of experience with a sustained metaphor, that of the puppet or vaudeville show, maintained by both scenographic elements and performance style. That metaphor was substantially subverted in the scene under discussion. And the device employed throughout the play of comic asides to an acknowledged audience had suddenly taken a drastic turn. By including the audience in his inadequate apology for his near strangulation of Harriet, Harry was inviting the audience to make a specific judgment. Moments later, when he pointedly offers his rifle to a succession of audience members, none of whom take up his invitation that they intercede, and demonstrates his disgusted dismissal of their presence, Harry offers his own judgment about their complicity

in the circumstances being depicted on stage.[15] Moreover, in his final touching of Harriet, in his leaving of the rifle, and in his unwillingness to yield to her final entreaties to take her with him, Harry's behavior suggests an awareness of her needs (and perhaps his own deficiencies) that we have not seen before. As I look back on this production, this scene, with its intentional departure from the stylized world that had been established, seems to me to have represented the best opportunity to generate audience empathy for either or both of these characters. But for reasons that I will discuss below, I do not think that empathy was consistently called forth from most audience members.

Sauter relies for his account of the way in which theatrical understanding is achieved on Gadamer's hermeneutics. He cites with approval Gadamer's idea that understanding is the result of the melding of two "horizons" - one representing the complex of signifying features of the text (or performance) created by the interlacing presence of the three modes of communication that I have described; and one representing the contextual circumstances of the reader (or spectator). Understanding is the product of the eventual fusion of these horizons (89). I have already acknowledged that Sauter's analysis is predicated upon an individual spectatorial subjectivity, as opposed to the collection of subjects who constitute an audience. Here, my own position as a director/spectator has diminished utility. I can speak with authority about the understanding I hoped to achieve, but I am unable to describe, by virtue of my

[15] In rehearsal, we had developed a variety of contingent responses by Harry in case an audience member actually engaged him, but in four weeks of performance, no spectator did so.

own reception, the actual experience of other audience members. Even if we construct an idealized composite spectator, there are obvious problems in attempting to identify the specific contextual circumstances of that spectator, inasmuch as these circumstances relate not only to issues of personal history and material circumstances, but also such intangibles as individual mood, alertness, etc. Gadamer says, "This definition of the work as the focal point of recognition and understanding also means that such an identity is bound up with variation and difference. Every work leaves the person who responds to it a certain leeway, a space to be filled in by himself" (1986: 26). What then of the audience as a pluralistic body?

We can say, as Susan Bennett does in her influential theoretical study of theatre audiences, that the theatre event is a culturally constructed product, and an examination of the various elements that figure in this construction may enable us to generalize about another kind of horizon: the horizon of an audience's expectations. Bennett derives the idea of the horizon of expectations in theatre audiences from two literary critics. The foundational idea that texts are mediated by the expectations of the reader in a specific historical moment is drawn from the work of Hans Robert Jauss, who sought to theorize an aesthetics of reception by positing that at its first publication a work is measured against a dominant horizon of expectations (Bennett 48-49). Bennett cites Susan R. Suleiman for her critique that Jauss ignores the possibility of different horizons of expectation arising within different readers in the same society, and answers this

objection by linking Jauss's diachronic horizon of expectations with the more synchronic, and therefore flexible, formulation by Stanley Fish of an "interpretive community," yielding readings that "then would be identifiable as socially and historically mediated and open to investigation in this light " (50). In her use of Jauss and Fish, Bennet extends a line of theoretical speculation articulated earlier by Carlson, in which he suggested that Fish's concept of interpretive communities avoids what, in Jauss, may be an overemphasis on text, by moving away from a resort to the text for authentication of a specific reading to a "'community of readers', socially defined, which shares common values and determines collectively the norms and conventions according to which individual readings will take place" (Carlson 1990: 13). This concept, according to Carlson, may be useful not only in describing theatre communities on a number of levels, ranging from the abstract and geographically scattered communities actually envisioned by Fish to the specific community assembled in a particular location for a particular performance.

Bennett develops the idea of a horizon of expectation with a specific interest in the material circumstances of production, from marketing to the physical characteristics of the theatre facility itself, from the social dimension of theatre-going to reception of the performance. "The horizon(s) of expectations brought by an audience to the theatre are bound to interact with every aspect of the theatrical event, and, for this reason, it is useful to examine the idea of the event and its general implications for the act of reception" (99). An examination

of the circumstances of production of *Harry's Way* not only helps to situate observations about the reception it received. It also offers information useful to the consideration of wonder.

Riverside Theatre, in its twenty-third season at the time of this writing, is a well-established cultural institution in Iowa City. Iowa City is a progressive university town with theatre audiences who tend to be highly educated and politically liberal. Despite its location in a university town, Riverside Theatre's audiences tend to be middle-aged and, like the rest of Iowa City, somewhat ethnically homogeneous, which is to say white and Christian. The theatre has, throughout its history, tended to produce psychologically-driven, and previously produced realistic works that might be characterized as displaying a mainstream Off Broadway aesthetic.[16] The theatre itself is an extremely intimate house that seats approximately 120 people. It has a tiny lobby that minimizes pre-show interaction.

Our production of *Harry's Way* represented a departure from the usual fare at Riverside Theatre in several ways. First, it was a new play, a world premiere, in fact, and therefore enjoyed no reputation (or presumed stamp of quality) on the basis of earlier productions. Second, the style of the production eschewed realism in favor of a highly stylized theatricality. Finally, it was freighted with a controversial point of view: that wife abuse could be the subject of broad, if exceedingly dark, comedy.

[16] I have, for example, directed plays like *Wit, Proof,* and *How I Learned to Drive* there in recent years. Our audiences are generally familiar with such plays, at least by reputation, as a result of their New York incarnations.

We set out to address these issues with an aggressive marketing campaign. The show logo featured a representation of the Punch and Judy characters, fixing this reference in the minds of the audience from the outset and not so subtly suggesting an interpretive strategy. Carlson points out that logos, ostensibly designed to attract attention and to entice people to attend the event, may also have a significant impact on reception (19). We were able to convince local newspapers to present feature stories about the production before opening, which contained large color photographs of the actors in some of their most outlandish costumes along with interviews of various production personnel seeking to prepare the audiences for a theatrical experience that departed from the standards with which they were familiar. We publicized our work with the Domestic Violence Intervention Project and trumpeted the public discussions that would follow selected performances.

In the most atypical aspect of this campaign, I wrote a piece for a local arts publication that described, in detail, the process by which the production concept was developed, provided some background on the commedia tradition and the work of Meyerhold, along with my own hopes and expectations about the ways in which the work would be received. In a blatant attempt to anticipate and condition audience reaction, I wrote:

> I expect a broad spectrum of reaction. I expect some people will be delighted. Others will be offended. Still others just won't get it. But whether we enrage or engage, repel or

> entertain, I hope we will provoke discussion and debate. I hope we will live up to our responsibilities as artists to pose difficult questions – and to shine a bit of light on the shadowy boundaries of our lives, where mysteries wait, as always, to confound us (Hunter 1997).

We had undertaken a conscious effort to shape the horizon of expectations of our audience. And we had endeavored to present enough public information so that the audience might be self-selecting enough to form an "interpretive community" that might receive this particular production in a productive way.

Harry's Way opened its four week run on January 24, 1997. The critical reception was enthusiastic (in fact, one of the reviewers approvingly quoted my newspaper article), and the response of audience members seemed quite positive. (I personally observed audience response in eight or ten performances.) Box office response overall, however, was somewhat disappointing. Despite the apparent positive response from those in attendance, we were clearly not benefiting from a "word-of-mouth" endorsement from most spectators. Our efforts to prepare our audience, to condition a specific interpretive community that would respond to the particulars of this production had not succeeded, at least in box office terms. Perhaps this should not have been surprising. Theatre history is replete with examples of deviations by audiences from the manner in which they were calculated to respond. "[T]he frequency of such disjunctures should provide clear evidence that the community of readers assembled for a

theatre event may apply very different strategies from those of the model readers assumed by the performance. Problems are particularly likely to arise when an experimental work resists the reading strategies of an audience expecting something more conventional" (Carlson 1990: 13-14). We speculated that the tone and style of the production deviated too much from the Riverside norm, that the production had been branded "weird" and "experimental" (two of the adjectives we heard most often reported back to us from spectators, even when they approved the overall experience). In other words, there was a significant disjuncture between the horizon of expectations assumed by the model director/spectator and the horizon of expectations actually existing in most audiences.

The two performances most interesting for the purposes of this analysis were those followed by organized panel discussions and audience feedback. These events were contemplated to address two separate issues: the unusual (by local standards) aesthetic of the production and its commentary on domestic violence. To address the former issue, we had invited the participation of two theatre scholars. With regard to the latter issue, we had invited counselors and clients from the Domestic Violence Intervention project. Both post-show discussions were well attended, with approximately two thirds of each house remaining for the dialogue. The theatre scholars (Art Borreca and Kim Marra, both members of the theatre department of the University of Iowa and both former professors of mine during my MFA candidacy) helped to place the

production style in a historical context, invoking not only Meyerhold but various other manifestations of modernist and avant-garde theatrical production during the early part of the 20th century. My sense was, however, that most audience members were eager to grapple with the issue of the way in which we had represented the social problem of domestic violence.

One of the DVIP counselors spoke first and was highly critical of the tone of the production, suggesting that it trivialized its subject matter and sought to extract humor from subject matter that contained none. She expressed considerable skepticism that any productive insights could be gleaned from such a presentation. Following her critique, a young woman, who I knew casually, raised her hand. When recognized, she articulated a contrary position based upon her own experience. With great emotion, she recounted a personal history (about which I had no previous knowledge) that involved a brutally abusive former husband. She went on to praise the production on two grounds: that it accurately represented that which she could never explain – how she could continue to love her former husband even in the face of his unconscionable conduct – and that the experience of watching it had provided her with an occasion of much needed emotional release. In effect, she described a personal catharsis.

Following her comments, several women, who were clients of DVIP, concurred. One suggested that she felt that the production enabled her to laugh at situations like her own, and that such laughter had a therapeutic function. The

DVIP representative graciously retracted some of her criticism in the face of this response (and during the second discussion, a week later, the DVIP representatives took a much more supportive view of the production). I was gratified to note that some discussion followed that directly engaged one of the playwright's central ideas: that unconditional love could be profoundly destructive.

The Elusiveness of Wonder

As I recall this production and the audience response to it in the context of my present project, I conclude that regardless of the success or failure of the production on other terms, I cannot point to any audience reactions which combined the sense of awe, discovery, and delight or profound emotions that I associate with theatrical wonder, with the possible exception of those women who spoke from their own experience. I have speculated that theatrical wonder is (or can be) aroused in the convergence of certain types of theatrical metaphors perceived in an experiential field that contains a significant dimension of empathetic reaction to one or more of the characters on stage. On the face of it, this production seemed to offer the circumstances that I associate with theatrical wonder. The entire production was framed by a sustained metaphor, reflected in all the design elements of the production and the acting style of the performers, that compared its characters to puppets and vaudeville performers. In the context of this extended metaphor we had worked to create emotional moments,

especially those described above, that might evoke empathy from the audience, especially for Harriet. A theoretical analysis of what might have prevented the expression of theatrical wonder yields additional insights about the character of that phenomenon. I believe that we unknowingly established two obstacles to the phenomenon of theatrical wonder: one dealing with the nature and operation of that extended metaphor; and the other relating to the possibility of empathy in our particular theatrical circumstances.

States cites an essay by Ted Cohen for the proposition that one aspect of the use of metaphor is to forge a sense of intimacy between the maker or the transmitter of a metaphor and the reader or recipient of that metaphor. The maker of the metaphor, in this view, extends a kind of invitation that is accepted by the appreciation of the metaphor by the reader, forging a kind of intimate community (States 1985: 114). In the case of *Harry's Way*, however, my intentions were very much to the contrary. I chose to use the Meyerholdian metaphor of puppetry and popular entertainment as a device of estrangement. My strategy was to create a sense of aesthetic distance so that the audience would engage the ideas of the play in a more abstract way, rather than respond viscerally to the repellent specter of a man abusing his spouse. (I had appropriated an aspect of Brechtian technique, while conveniently ignoring Brecht's announced purpose in formulating the technique: to defeat empathy.) To the extent that by community States means to propose a kind of commonality of reference and understanding, I had, indeed, hoped to create a sense of

community. But if the notion of intimacy carries with it a sense of familiarity, I was consciously working to resist that.

States also, however, discusses metaphor as a theatrical mechanism that makes visible the invisible, which allows the stage to encompass that which is beyond its literal scope. "Metaphor is a device for getting in more world on the principle of similarity, or correspondence, whereby the world imitates the action" (States 65). This more closely accords with my intentions. By broadening the "world" to include violent scenarios whose violence does not necessarily horrify and offend us, I hoped to devise a theatrical circumstance that would allow for a deeper and (I hoped) more searching engagement with Harry's and Harriet's behavior. I believe, at least insofar as the intention to desensitize the audience to Harry's violence, this worked. In every performance that I observed, audience members greeted certain stage conduct with a laughter that would have been almost unthinkable had that conduct been represented more naturalistically. To that extent, the extended metaphor of *Harry's Way* worked. It was, at least at the outset, what a cognitive linguist might call a novel metaphoric expression, where the unusual character of a perceived comparison, Harry's and Harriet's life as either a Punch and Judy puppet show or a variety entertainment, could conceivably assist the spectator in seeing that collective life in a new way (Kövecses 32). My strategy in offering these metaphors was consistent with what has been described as "combining," or activating several known metaphors (HUMAN BEING AS PUPPET and LIFE AS SHOW) simultaneously (Kövecses

47-49) so as to invite the spectator to appreciate the implicit comparisons, and even, in the sense that Ricoeur celebrates the value of metaphor, to make new meaning (Gerhart 217).

I have suggested that Ricoeur distinguishes between semiotics, as the science of signs, and semantics, as the science of the sentence, with all the integrative capacity associated with the sentence. This is roughly analogous to the distinction in performance analysis between a semiotic and a phenomenological approach, which like the sentence deals, not with individual signs, but with the integrative capacity, the experiential gestalt, of a performance event. It is in that context, that of the integrated, holistic, experience of this particular theatre event, that the novelty of the metaphor became exhausted, and with that exhaustion came the loss of the capacity to engender wonder.

I have speculated that theatrical wonder involves, in part, the apprehension and appreciation of a novel metaphor, an unexpected comparison that excites the imagination as to hitherto unanticipated possibilities, what Bachelard called “the original amazement of the naïve observer” (107). Bachelard immediately cautioned, however, “Amazement of this kind is rarely felt twice. Life quickly wears it down” (ibid.). So does sustained exposure. The combined metaphor of *Harry’s Way* is so unrelenting as to induce a familiarity that precludes the unexpected, at least insofar as the metaphor is concerned. Indeed, I made specific use of this metaphoric expectation in the scene described above. By rupturing the metaphor with Harry’s and Harriet’s suddenly

more naturalistic conduct, I hoped to jolt the audience into a sudden emotional identification. But this theatrical exercise in defeating expectation was almost the opposite of wonder. I was seeking to remove the audience from an imaginary realm and douse its members with the chilly waters of an uncomfortable reality. Of course, I was not consciously engaged in a consideration of wonder at the time, but in retrospect, I believe that I pursued a directorial course that made its evocation most unlikely.

I *had* set out, on the other hand, to stimulate empathy for Harriet (and something akin to empathy for Harry). Here, I believe that I failed. I had speculated that people would empathize not only with Harriet's circumstantial predicament, but also with the physical pain she suffered. There are numerous moments in the script when another character innocuously touches Harriet, only to have her wince or recoil in pain because of the extent of her bruising at Harry's hands. I had even developed a specific, recurring, synthesized sound effect that punctuated each of the moments when she felt such discomfort. The staging of a suffering body raises a number of complex issues, including the body and its representation as a site of political discourse. "Post-Brechtian theater demonstrates a recurrent and markedly phenomenological interest in the body as a political entity and in the experiential issues which this body brings into focus" (Garner 161-162). That phenomenological interest, however, must take into account the distinction between suffering and pain. Elaine Scarry argues that physical pain, unlike other states of consciousness, has no referential content. "It

is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language" (5, emphasis in original). In Scarry's analysis of physical pain, this resistance to language ensures that physical pain remains a primal and personal experience, one that cannot be shared and cannot, therefore, be depicted in art. She distinguishes physical pain from psychological suffering, which does have referential content, is susceptible to verbal objectification, and is, in fact, frequently depicted in art (11). If empathy entails a kind of sharing of the experience of one subject by another, it follows that the experience of physical pain, as a phenomenon characterized by its lack of sharability, is not the province of empathy. The engagement of suffering, on the other hand, under Scarry's analysis, might (perhaps even should) be associated with empathy. But why, then, was it difficult for many audience members to share Harriet's psychological suffering?

I think, in this case, that the metaphoric context in which that suffering took place stripped from the bodied subject much of its immediacy and made an empathetic response less likely than it might have been in another context. Phillip Zarrilli, in *Acting (Re)Considered*, observes that "all languages of acting are metaphorical" and then goes on to cite Lakoff's and Johnson's influential *Metaphors We Live By* to pose the question that begins his survey of acting theories and approaches: "[W]hat specific 'metaphors' are actors to 'live by'?" (10). While Zarrilli engages the notion of metaphor to interrogate acting practices, here the confluence of metaphor and acting choices helped to

condition reception. The aesthetic distance occasioned by the puppet metaphor helped to create an emotional distance on the part of spectators that hindered empathy.

On the most general level, some measure of empathy is implicated in all theatrical reception. States observes:

> But can art ever deliver itself from empathy? Isn't empathy the force that keeps us in our theater seats? In short, a kind of sensory self-projection or willingness to vibrate in tune with the work, with whatever the work may be up to. On this level, empathy disappears only when beauty disappears, when the play makes a mistake, or when an accident occurs on stage, and we come back, prematurely, to ourselves (1985:104).

But the empathy States is describing here is that quality of self-projection and absorption that characterizes any focused engagement with an art object. The further refinement of empathy that is at theoretical stake in my argument, an intersubjective empathy, involves more: It is a self-projection and absorption that has a dimension of emotional and intellectual identification, and, most fundamentally, an explicit acknowledgment of mutual humanity, a sharing of experience. States makes reference to this kind of empathy as "the empathy of signification, since its basis lies in a mirrorlike reflection of sign and signified" (ibid.) In the case of *Harry's Way*, I believe that there was a disjuncture for most

spectators between the sign of the puppet, reinforced in a variety of ways throughout the production, and the signified human being I sought to evoke as a mirror of audience members.[17]

This disconnect was, I believe, not simply a result of the object status of a puppet, but related to a series of associations that I unwittingly evoked through my employment of the puppet metaphor. At least since the appropriation of puppets by modernist artists in the early part of the twentieth century, puppets have been associated with a metaphysical belief that humankind was dominated by larger forces beyond its control, a plaything in the hands of fate. As such, humans could be likened to marionettes, compelled by their own lack of agency to follow the direction imparted by strings held by those forces (Bell 1995: 51). The person as puppet metaphor took on a sense of helplessness, a pejorative sense of an objectified entity subject only to manipulation. This man-as-marionette metaphor resonated powerfully in theatrical theory as propounded by Edward Gordon Craig, whose "enthusiasm for puppet and marionette related mostly to his desire to transform the human actor into a totally submissive instrument by means of which the director, who now stood at the center of the production, could realize his personal vision of the theatrical work" (Bell 1995: 55). As a director, I unequivocally reject Craig's (theoretical) derogation of the contribution of the actor as a creative collaborator, but by encouraging my audience to view Harry and Harriet as puppets, I deprived them of agency,

[17] In retrospect, the thickness of Dato's Georgian accent, which required unusual effort on the part of the audience to decipher, also contributed to the disjuncture I describe.

relegating them to instruments subject to the design of external forces. This created a kind of empathy gulf.

I had sought a kind of Brechtian estrangement in order to allow the ideas of the play to resonate more freely. In retrospect, I think that strategy succeeded, but its unintended consequence was to create a significatory obstacle, a kind of semiotic trap that accomplished the goal of intellectual distance while subverting the other goal of fostering empathy, except for those women who, on the basis of their traumatic personal experience, found a personal connection to the characters overwhelmed metaphorical diversions.

Harry's Way was a personal success in many ways. It opened stylistic possibilities for me that continue to figure in my work. The experience of this production propelled me into much more sophisticated attempts to marry my directorial work to the theoretical enterprises that I consciously engage. On the stage of my memory, illuminated by a lighting instrument that enables hindsight, it performs with power and distinction, as a milestone that directed my own theatrical imagination into new and worthwhile avenues. With respect to the pursuit of theatrical wonder, however, it charts avenues to avoid: theatrical metaphors whose intensity of use defeats their novelty; metaphors that evoke undesired ideas or associations; and staging strategies that frustrate the possibility of perceiving a mutuality of experience and an affirmation of agency that I believe is a necessary precondition to the establishment of the empathetic field in which wonder is cultivated.

Chapter Four

Verona in Jerusalem: Empathy and Compassion

In the summer of 2002, I directed a production of *Romeo and Juliet* for the Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival, set in the contemporary Middle East, which served as an occasion to explore theatrical empathy and the closely related phenomenon of compassion. I understand compassion to mean not only the capacity to feel another's suffering, but also the desire to alleviate that suffering. The desire to eliminate suffering clearly has utopian dimensions. In this chapter, I will consider whether or not empathy and compassion are distinguishable, and demonstrate that this production was specifically designed to evoke compassion in a specific political context, that of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. I will recount the development of this production in some detail and discuss some of the theoretical and practical issues raised by seeking to theatrically represent a cultural other in an ethical way. While I continue to maintain the role of empathy in the phenomenon of theatrical wonder, and the potential political efficacy of wonder in generating moments of utopian longing, I am unable to prove that moments in this production generated that sense of wonder for specific spectators. I do claim that the production succeeded in promoting a sense of compassion, and that that sense of compassion is a small but necessary essential step toward moving beyond conflict and hatred.

Background

The Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival is a summer project of Riverside Theatre. While the company in its season proper is devoted to a largely contemporary repertoire,[18] the Shakespeare Festival is quite a different enterprise. Housed in a lovely outdoor theatre with an Elizabethan architectural theme that seats 480 patrons and nestled in a verdant city park, the Festival, now four years old, has become a major cultural event in the annual life of this sophisticated university town. It is generously supported by the city of Iowa City, receives extensive coverage in local media, and has been embraced by the community. The company operates under an Equity contract, and the acting company is assembled on the basis of auditions in several parts of the country.

In the brief history of the Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival at that time (2003), four plays by Shakespeare had been mounted. I had directed three of the four: the inaugural production, a rather traditional *Twelfth Night*; the second year offering, a wackily contemporary *As You Like It*, infused with an "indie rock" score; and now *Romeo and Juliet*, mounted in the third year in revolving repertory with a production of *The Comedy of Errors*. *Romeo and Juliet* was the first tragedy selected for the Festival. I felt a burden of responsibility.

The idea of a contemporary Middle Eastern setting was immediately appealing to me, but the reasons for that appeal were not immediately apparent. I am not sure why the idea of setting *Romeo and Juliet* in Jerusalem occurred to

[18] In recent years, I have directed plays like *Wit, Proof,* and *Accidental Death of an Anarchist.* My production there of Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?,* which was mounted after the production considered here, provides the foundation for the next chapter.

me. I was not at that time immersed in the geo-political machinations that provide the pulse of the Middle East. The second intifada had begun, but even the most prescient prognosticators failed to foresee the pattern of violent escalation and wrenching human tragedy that was to evolve. I am a Jew by birth and culture, but I have been non-observant from childhood, and I certainly feel no special allegiance to Israel. In fact, I was predisposed to be hostile to the Sharon government, which I understood to be still another manifestation of the right wing political impulses that were afflicting the world and threatening many of the values I hold dear. Nor was I sympathetic to the Arafat regime. I believed then, and I believe now, that Arafat was a duplicitous, self-serving impediment to the rightful aspirations of his long-suffering people. My knowledge of the region was limited to information gleaned from the *New York Times*, CNN, and an occasional magazine article. I had, in short, no personal stake whatsoever, no political agenda to advance. I was not even actively seeking a novel approach to the play. I simply wanted to make the tragedy of the play meaningful, the experience of the play fresh and compelling to an audience that had thus far experienced (in the context of the Festival) a selection of fairly frothy comedies. And I had an intuition, a still inchoate conviction, that contextualizing *Romeo and Juliet* in the contemporary Middle East might yield compelling theatre and a re-energization of the text.

I had not yet begun the painstaking scrutiny involved in testing the idea against the text. I certainly was not thinking yet of the production in terms of any

scholarly research. And I knew, of course, that many people had passionate opinions about the conflict, but controversy was not on my mind. I was seized simply with the restless momentum of that theatrical intuition, and so I took the idea to the artistic directors of Riverside Theatre, who were both my friends and my prospective employers. I needed their approval to proceed with the idea.

They responded with some reservation and a series of penetrating questions. Specifically, they were concerned that a contemporary Middle Eastern context would squelch any opportunities for humor in the play. Moreover, they were concerned that a focus on polarizing and controversial issues might overwhelm the ability of an audience to appreciate the play itself. I responded to their questions and their concerns with a litany of assurances, but for the most part, I was bluffing, because I had not yet thought through most of these issues. In any case, Ron Clark and Jody Hovland, the artistic leaders of Riverside Theatre, know me well and trust me. I had at that time directed 17 or 18 productions for them over the preceding eight years. Accordingly, despite what I perceived as some misgivings, they gave me their blessing to proceed with my Middle Eastern *Romeo and Juliet.*

Theorizing the Production

Only after I had formulated this vague plan for a production did I begin to think of it in a more disciplined theoretical way, especially with regard to the opportunities it provided to think critically about the operation of empathy in

theatrical events and the relationship of an empathetic dynamic to the capacity of that presentation to engender a sense of wonder, a theoretical interest that had finally taken the shape of an academic inquiry. I contend that theatrical wonder, in what seems like an insistent mantra by now, is related both to the use of embodied metaphor and to the empathic exchange between performer and spectator. But wonder is, I believe, more than astonishment, more than appreciation. It is an inkling of potential that exceeds expectation – and therefore points to a realm of possibility, to a domain of aspiration. It is in that dimension of wonder that utopian performatives may arise from the inchoate longing, the roughly formed desire that is a part of every theatrical event.

In arguing that the human capacity to perceive beauty is necessarily related to the human capacity to conceive justice, Elaine Scarry observes that "[s]omething beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation" (29). For Scarry, the considered apprehension of beauty involves both symmetry and the idea of fairness, both of which are fundamental to the idea of the just. I suggest that what I call wonder operates in much the same way, by conjuring an awareness of what can be as opposed to what is. Or as Susan Neiman puts it, discussing the idea of the *is* and the *ought* in western philosophy: "We experience wonder in the moments when we see the world as it ought to be – an experience so deep that the *ought* melts away" (323, italics in original). Maurya Wickstrom, citing Neiman, adds that the desire for the world to

be as it ought to be is as healthy a human impulse as any we have, that "[t]he moments when we feel the *is* and the *ought* merge, so that there is no difference between the two, is the experience of wonder" (Wickstrom 180, italics in original). Wonder, therefore, may be understood as not only an intimation of something better, a utopian gesture, but even the phenomenological experience of it – at least for a brief time.

Like many theatre people, I have always taken as an article of faith the proposition that theatre had unique potential to affect people's lives. I invoked the usual assumptions about the vibrant immediacy of a live performance and the opportunities for community dialogue inherent in a process where groups of people assembled to collectively consider cogently expressed ideas. I was, of course, aware of the historical role of theatre as a vehicle of civil discourse, and I had absorbed Brechtian prescriptions for a politically efficacious epic theatre. But I had not yet really thought in a rigorous way about theatre as a utopian project, as a means of both imagining and gesturing toward a world in which conflict resolution proceeds not from the exercise of power but from the exercise of human connection, understanding, and compassion. And I had not yet concluded that an empathic process was central to that human connection, understanding, and compassion.

I want to argue that empathy is essential to any utopian project and to the experience of wonder in which a utopian possibility is intimated. I want to argue further that theatre represents a uniquely useful laboratory for the exploration of

empathy, and that my recent production of *Romeo and Juliet* represents an attempt at such an exploration.

In the first chapter, I noted that psychologists identify at least three kinds of empathy which are pertiment here: “1) a cognitive awareness and understanding of the emotions and feelings of another person; 2) a vicarious affective response to the emotional experiences of another person that mirrors or mimics that emotion; and 3) assuming, in one’s mind, the role of another person” (Reber 249). Shakespeare demonstrated his uncanny intuitions about mental and emotional process time and time again. Macbeth is a tragic hero because his tortured imagination and poetic sensibility provide an opportunity for audiences to identify with his humanity even in the midst of his capitulation to evil. Encountering a sensitive performance of this character, we may experience something like the first definition of empathy: an intellectual grasping of another’s affect. Lear howls in Act 3, Scene 4:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these?

This is an example of the second definition of empathy, a vicarious affective response to the emotional experiences of another person, drawing upon the immediate experience of the empathizer. When the Nurse, in *Romeo and Juliet*,

goes, at Juliet's behest, to seek out Romeo at considerable personal risk, she is taking on the perspective of someone she deeply loves, the third kind of empathy. Various definitions of empathy have nuances that shift between the emotional and the cognitive – and between understanding and actually standing in another's circumstances.

I tend to use the words "empathy" and "compassion" almost interchangeably, but this is not universally the case. Martha C. Nussbaum argues in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001) that, from a philosophic tradition, compassion is distinct from empathy, which she defines as "an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer" (327). In her view empathy is not sufficient in and of itself to foster compassion. A juror may empathize with the experience of a criminal, for example, without having compassion, if she believes the criminal to be responsible for his actions and guilty (329). For Nussbaum, empathy is an operation of imaginative engagement, but one which is value neutral, at least in some circumstances. Compassion, on the other hand, enlists our imagination for the good of others and makes them the subject of our care (13). In assessing the psychoanalytical and experimental literature, however, Nussbaum acknowledges that there is significant evidence of a connection between empathy and compassionate emotion, concluding that "if empathy is not clearly necessary for compassion, it is a prominent route to it" (332). Moreover, compassion is an indisputably worthy destination, because the experimental literature clearly suggests that the experience of compassion is

closely linked to altruistic action (336-340).

Nussbaum's project is to argue that, in philosophy, emotions must be accorded a central place in any system of ethical reasoning. That essential insight reverberates, of course, in discourses beyond philosophy. The apprehension of emotion, or feeling, is implicated in discourses as diverse as neuro-science (see Damasio) and performance studies. Dolan, in arguing for a "utopian performative," suggests that performance has a utopian role not in prescribing a course of action, but affectively, by providing intersubjective moments when the dynamic between performer and audience allows both to "feel," in small, incremental ways, a utopian possibility. It is a way of imagining by feeling (Dolan 2001). This is what I was after in my production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I wanted my audience, by feeling profound compassion for an Israeli Romeo and a Palestinian Juliet, to imagine a world in which cultural and historical hatred did not trump every human exchange.

Feminist critic Maria Lugones has described (in non-theatrical contexts) circumstances in which individuals may achieve productive understandings of each other despite cultural and identity differences, circumstances that she calls "world traveling." Lugones argues passionately that women of color must playfully travel across "worlds" to achieve cross-cultural and cross-racial loving (Lugones 3-4). Distinguishing her ideas from a potentially destructive project of traditional assimilation, she concludes that "traveling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying them . . . because by traveling to their 'world' we can

understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes.* Only when we travel to each other's 'worlds' are we fully subjects to each other" (italics in original, 17). Lugones is concerned with both the material and the ideological locations of identity, but the "worlds" that she references are expansive enough to contain more than just the indicia of identity. She is theorizing about conditions for intimacy that bridge disparate identity locations, which both authorize and enable travel to realms outside the boundaries of self. The most essential condition for such a phenomenon in Lugones's formulation is a simultaneously thoughtful and playful identification with or empathy for a stranger. Such identification is a relatively common experience in the preparation of theatrical performance and such identification is a frequent element of audience reception.

A thoughtful and playful identification with a stranger is precisely what many acting techniques train actors to work toward both in classes and in rehearsal (Dolan 1993, 438). Theatre artists often must investigate the emotional and cognitive landscapes that transform the theoretical abstract into the theatrical particular. They must have an artistic means of reckoning with the emotional and intellectual dimension of Otherness that they seek to inhabit. The skill of the performer (or the director or the playwright) in portraying Others in fictionalized circumstances and the effort of the audience in receiving that portrayal <u>together</u> establish an empathic portal, an opportunity to empathize with an Other that otherwise might never occur. It is a process that yields a notion of inclusion that

respects difference, invites compassion, and that seems especially useful in imagining better human circumstances.

Much of the foregoing discussion of empathy and compassion, especially in its theatrical applications, makes little distinction between identification with another and identification with an Other. Yet any gesture toward a utopian vision that seeks the resolution of conflict between people divided by culture and identity must navigate that distinction. By transforming the Capulets and Montagues from feuding families with similar traditions to warring cultures, I was engaging this problem directly. These theoretical considerations were very present as I began to conceive my production of a Middle Eastern *Romeo and Juliet.* I began my preparation with a crash course in the history of the region, consuming any book I could find that accounted for the sources of this very troubled present, and with readings about both Arab and Israeli culture.

I was exquisitely aware of the various pitfalls associated with the representation of cultural others, especially Middle Eastern Others. (Edward Said, the cultural and literary critic most responsible for sensitizing western intellectuals to the perils of "Orientalism" was, after all, a Palestinian expatriate.) When and to what extent an actor, writer or director may inhabit a stranger, particularly an other whose complex of identifying factors situates that other as a member of a group which has been marginalized by and excluded from a dominant discourse? May a white actor play a person of color? Should a male writer presume to explore the experiences of a woman? Can a heterosexual

director undertake a project about lesbians? The most orthodox response from a position of identity politics is a resounding "no." The reasoning is that members of marginalized groups, in order to claim their own subjectivity, must struggle to describe and name their own experience (Harding, 128). Sandra Harding states unambiguously that only members of such a group can speak as such because only they have "a certain epistemic privilege about their own experiences. They can more easily detect the subtle forms of their marginalization and of discrimination against them" (131-132). Her very lack of ambiguity, however, is problematic in the context of theatre, where, virtually by definition, practitioners (especially actors) must imaginatively project themselves into fictional circumstances quite foreign to their lived experience.

Other contemporary theorizing about speaking for a marginalized other rejects the absolutism of Harding's position. Linda Martín Alcoff, while acknowledging the grave discursive responsibility of speaking for others, suggests a series of interrogatory practices that help to insure that an analysis of power relations is a part of any such speech. She urges a critical examination of the actual impetus to speak. She states that the speaker must interrogate the bearing of his/her location and the context in which the speech is engaged. (Significantly for the purposes of this argument, she argues that interrogation would be most effective if undertaken collectively with other people.) She writes that accountability must be a part of speaking for others, and finally, she asserts that the receivers of communication must evaluate the effects of the speech on

its discursive and material context (Alcoff 111-113). I maintain that a sensitive and critically principled production process provides a significant opportunity for precisely the kind of interrogation that Alcoff contemplates. The formal rehearsal process should begin with a thorough investigation not only of textual interpretation and dramaturgical research, but also with an open and thoughtful ventilation of any issues of representation that may arise. And even before the rehearsal process is actually undertaken, Alcoff's interrogation must take place in production meetings which determine casting, and before that in the director/ producer process that selects projects or staffs them. My point is simply that the theatrical process provides opportunities at multiple stages for principled reflection and critical self-consciousness about who speaks for whom on stage. Critical self-consciousness, after all, is simply an aspect of the self-awareness that is a vital part of most theatrical technique. And it was on that principle that I sought to design my rehearsal and production process.[19]

The Production Process

That process began with casting. The Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival is a professional undertaking, operating under a contract with Actors Equity

[19] I had some recent experience in representing cultural others on stage. I had directed a new play entitled *Bricks and Lyrics*, a historical drama about modern India by an Indian playwright Abhijat Joshi in a university setting where most roles were necessarily assigned to non-Asian student actors. We made a determined effort to interrogate our assumptions about representation at every step, and we availed ourselves of the generous help of Indian consultants as well as the almost daily contributions of the playwright, who served as a cultural tutor even as he was revising a new script. As it turned out, the play was attended by large numbers of the local South Asian community, who received the performance with generosity and enthusiasm. We actually received several compliments on the sensitivity with which we had portrayed Indian culture at the time of the partition.

Association (the trade union of professional actors). A company is assembled both on the basis of personal networks and extensive auditioning. The Festival in the summer of 2002 was to include productions of both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Comedy of Errors*, to be performed in revolving repertory. This meant that the company of actors hired would be cast in both productions. Both shows would be rehearsed simultaneously and would eventually alternate in performance. This made for an especially complicated casting process, because while an actor playing a major role in one production (say Romeo or the Nurse) would typically be cast in a smaller role in the other production, it remained a daunting task to find actors competent to perform both shows. *The Comedy of Errors*, directed by Ron Clark, was conceived quite broadly, employing a great deal of physical humor and vivid, cartoon-like characterizations. Because of the competing demands of that show, the hiring of some Riverside regulars, and the financial constraints of the casting process, it was simply not possible to impose casting requirements of specific ethnicity or even type in most cases. Our task was to seek actors with the theatrical skills to handle verse in an outdoor setting (which required strong vocal instruments and the capacity to project a certain theatrical "size"), who also possessed the versatility to move from slapstick comedy to a culturally specific tragedy. It was a tall order.

By the time the casting process began, I had determined to use this production to theorize about the operation of empathetic processes in the reception of theatrical communication. Having by now read a good deal of

Middle Eastern history and commentary about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I decided to set the production in contemporary Jerusalem, one of the few places in the region where middle class and wealthy Israelis and Palestinians are in frequent contact with each other. This made some of the action of the play plausible. Jerusalem is also a sort of symbolic epicenter of the struggle between these peoples. As an important and contested site in all three of the world's major religions[20], but especially between Muslims and Jews, it struck me as a useful and dramatically combustible location for the blood feud between the Montagues and the Capulets.

Before I could begin the casting process, however, I had another major production decision with which to wrestle. I had decided to set *Romeo and Juliet* in an Israeli/Palestinian context, but I had not yet decided how I would designate the warring families. While Shakespeare's text depicts "two noble houses" and assigns no special blame or culpability to either side for the tragic consequences that ensue from the families' hatred, it seemed clear that representing the Capulets as Israeli and the Montagues as Palestinian, or vice versa, constituted a directorial choice of complex and not entirely foreseeable implications. My first impulse was to portray the Capulets as Palestinian for purely theatrical reasons. Romeo meets Juliet, of course, at the Capulets party, and the prospect of using

[20] Various histories and narratives of the competing cultural presences in Jerusalem invariably betray the ideological biases of their authors almost immediately. For example, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre's highly dramatic account of the struggle for Jerusalem and birth of Israel (*O Jerusalem)* is overflowing with admiring characterizations of various Israeli historical persona even as it deprecates Arab positions and leaders, while Karen Armstrong's *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* clearly respects the aspirations of the Palestinian people and attempts a more evenhanded historical account but ultimately dissolves into a fairly pessimistic assessment of the city's future.

Arabic music and dance to stage that party was intuitively appealing to me. As I began to think more seriously about the issue, and as I began to speak with people more intimately familiar with both Israeli and Arabic culture, I had second thoughts. Virtually everyone I consulted, from both Arab and Israeli perspectives, agreed that it would be much more likely for a cross-cultural romance to flourish if the couple consisted of an Arab man and an Israeli woman. Everyone agreed that the relative cloistering of Arab women and the extreme consequences and cultural stigma that would likely ensue as a result of an Arabic woman's flouting tradition by seeking a romantic or sexual liaison with a non-Arab, especially a Jew, made such a relationship close to unthinkable.

I was reading Raphael Patai's well-known cultural profile *The Arab Mind* at the time; he argues emphatically that unlike in the West, where an individual is not traditionally held morally or legally responsible for the acts of another, in Arabic culture, family and kinship bonds are sufficiently strong that all members suffer a loss of face and prestige upon the "dishonorable" behavior of any individual family member, especially when that behavior is that of a woman who is a blood relation. "In the Arab world, the greatest dishonor that can befall a man results from the sexual misconduct of his daughter or sister" (127). Clearly, an Arabic Juliet who flouted both tradition and family honor by permitting a personal entanglement with an Israeli Romeo would be inflammatory.

On the other hand, Patai's cultural study was first written in 1972. Edward Said's influential critique of orientalism with its full panoply of generalizations and

stereotypes about Middle Eastern culture followed only six years later. In summing up his position, Said wrote, “My objection to what I have called Orientalism is not that it is just the antiquarian study of Oriental languages, societies and peoples, but that as a system of thought Orientalism approaches a heterogenous, dynamic and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and from, so to speak, above” (333). As Said points out, virtually all contemporary Orientalist scholarship emphasizes the male-dominated Arabic family as an indispensable part of a mythic Arabic discourse (311). I was determined not to fall into the trap of staging an assortment of clichés about the Palestinian experience.

I considered that within the Arab world, Palestinian culture was fairly secular and that there were role models available for young Palestinian girls of women who had achieved power and influence once denied to Arab women. (Hanan Ashrawi, the prominent Palestinian legislator and statesperson comes to mind.) And Juliet was, to my mind, not only an impulsive and passionate adolescent, but also something of a teenage rebel. The notion of a free-thinking and empowered Juliet, taking responsibility for her own desires, was an appealing one. I determined to follow my original impulse – to represent the Capulets as Palestinian and the Montagues as Israeli.

As I thought about the implications of this decision, I realized that it also

represented significant opportunities relative to my larger project of theorizing the functions of empathy in politically charged theatre. The Capulet family is featured much more in the text of *Romeo and Juliet* than the Montague family. In the Capulet family, we see the clearest manifestation of the mistrust and antipathy that divides the families (in the person of Tybalt), and the Capulet family has entire scenes within which to express their feelings for and about their daughter, including a particularly wrenching scene (IV.5) in which their grief at her supposed death is foregrounded. I welcomed the challenge of establishing an empathic bond between the audience (who I presumed had a predisposition that favored the Israeli side of the conflict) and a group of Palestinians (whose misery and despair invited compassion irrespective of political positions).

I was especially interested in casting a Romeo and a Juliet who could carry the weight of these demanding roles but also be credible as the impulsive teenagers Shakespeare described. We held local auditions in Iowa City and more extensive auditions in Chicago, but two of my most important casting decisions were to come from supplementary auditions. Riverside Theatre had been invited to audition graduate acting students at the Professional Theatre Training Program at the University of Delaware, a program primarily devoted to training classical actors. We cast several actors from those auditions, but certainly a pivotal casting opportunity presented itself when I encountered a young actor there named Zaki Abdelhamid. Zaki is a Jordanian national whose Palestinian parents had fled from the West Bank to Jordan during the Israeli/Arab

war of 1967. He had lived most of his life in Amman, with a brief sojourn in Beirut, before coming to the United States to pursue an acting career.

Quite apart from his skills as an actor, Zaki speaks Arabic fluently, is quite knowledgeable about Palestinian politics and culture, and was wildly enthusiastic about the production concept. I recognized immediately, of course, that he would be an invaluable asset as a cultural resource as well as an actor, a role he embraced with both energy and measured authority. I cast him as Paris, Juliet's suitor. Shortly after completing the casting process, the Chicago actor I had selected to play Juliet dropped out to pursue a movie opportunity. I had no other Juliet prospects with whom I was comfortable, but I happened to be in New York on unrelated business. After hastily arranging additional auditions, I saw forty or fifty aspiring Juliets, but was especially impressed with an actor named Nicole Raphael, who combined wonderful skills and training with an especially youthful appearance and a magnetic presence. When she accepted our offer, casting was finally complete.

As someone with personal experience in and knowledge of the Middle East and one of the cultures we were representing, Zaki was an unexpected asset to the production process. As the beginning of rehearsal grew closer and my own book and periodical-based research reached a plateau of practical limitation, I began seeking the informational and experiential resources I felt were necessary to undertake the vexing problem of representing cultural others with some degree of integrity.

Joni L. Jones has outlined a series of strategies for seeking cultural authenticity in performance ethnography. Her work deals with the embodied representation of an ethnographer whose work is contained in her own performance, but several of the principle she articulates have considerable currency even in a more conventional theatrical context, when other cultures are to be represented. She suggests that the performance should address a specific idea rather than provide a general "you are there" atmosphere (4). In the case of this production, I was intent on probing for opportunities for compassion in an otherwise hate-filled cultural struggle. Clearly, we did not attempt to literally transport the spectator to contemporary Jerusalem. Shakespeare's language was largely undisturbed. Jones cautions that the subjectivity of the ethnographer must be foregrounded (5). Here, even the casual spectator was well aware that she was watching a subjective directorial concept in action. If the fact of the performance was not itself sufficient evidence of this, program notes clarified the issue. Jones writes that "[m]ultivocality helps to mitigate the authority of the ethnographer, and provide varied, even contradictory perspectives that the audience must synthesize" (ibid). This production was certainly characterized by an extensive multivocality. My voice as a director was in dialogue with Shakespeare's text. The warring families themselves, as represented in this production, together with the observations of Lawrence and the Prince, offered contradictory perspectives. The Jones principle, however, that was most prominent in this representation of cultures was her invocation that the

"performance should grow as a collaboration between the ethnographer and the community [or communities] being presented" (4).

I had always planned to attach people with specific expertise to the production as "dramaturgical consultants." Eventually, I recruited a number of people with specific expertise about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and both Israeli and Palestinian culture. On the Israeli side of the equation, I solicited and received the help of Gerald Sorokin, the director of the Iowa City branch of Hillel (the foundation for Jewish campus life) and a political science professor who had served as a fellow at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, and Rachelle Tsachor, an Israeli citizen and former sergeant in the Israeli army, as well as a dance and movement scholar. Both Gerry and Rachelle were active advocates for Israeli positions within the Iowa City community. To secure some additional expertise on the Palestinian side, I eventually located a Palestinian doctoral student, Osama Saba, and a research chemist, Jehad Jadou, both active in local Palestinian politics, and both of whom agreed to serve as consultants to the production after receiving assurances from me that I would represent Palestinians fairly.[21] I had to assure all my experts that I had no particular political axe to grind, no specific agenda to pursue, except that I wanted to create a contemporary Middle Eastern context for the production that was as fairly drawn as possible and to explore my capacity to arouse an

[21] I could understand their reticence. Even in progressive Iowa City, in the post 9/11 world, there was considerable suspicion directed toward Arabic men. In fact, when I told people that I had found two men willing to help with the production whose names were "Osama" and "Jehad," I generally received incredulous stares and jokes that betrayed more than a little bitterness and hostility.

empathetic response on the part of the audience despite any political and/or emotional predispositions that they might have.

Even before the first day of rehearsals, however, the realities of the conflict, and the passions that it inspires, intruded into my tidily organized production plans. The intensity of the intifada had been mounting almost daily, suicide bombings within Israel had reached a peak, and Israel had sent significant armored forces into the occupied territories. One of the most significant incursions was the siege of Ramallah, the city that served as Yasser Arafat's headquarters. Ramallah was also the home of Jehad's family. As his fear for their safety mounted, he found himself understandably disinclined to participate in a theatrical production in which he had no emotional or intellectual investment, and he withdrew. Osama followed suit, claiming as an excuse the intensity of his academic schedule. But I believed then and believe now that the escalating horror of the conflict, and his emotional stakes in it, rendered participation in a theatricalized version of the conflict unthinkable. I scrambled to find another Palestinian consultant and successfully convinced a young Palestinian electrical engineer, Yaser Abudagga, to share some of his experience and expertise as part of our rehearsal process.

At almost the same time, a friend of mine (who happens to be Jewish, a distinguished Shakespeare scholar and an important supporter of the Shakespeare Festival) called me to urge that I reconsider the production. She, too, was observing the events in the Middle East with growing horror and

emotion. She tearfully expressed her conviction that my production could either sensationalize or trivialize a global catastrophe. Her emotional attachment to Israel and her fear of the present situation was such that she was unable to conceive of a way to represent the conflict on the stage. I responded that I appreciated her convictions, but that staging difficult and potentially controversial matters was central to my identity as an artist and I could not conceive of circumstances in which any subject was off limits for theatrical exploration. This difficult and emotional telephone conversation lasted over forty minutes. While I was full of predictable, self-affirming bravado, I must acknowledge that my confidence in the project was shaken. I felt honor-bound to discuss these urgent communications with Ron Clark and Jody Hovland, the Festival's artistic directors. Despite their initial reservations, however, they were now committed to the production, and I took considerable solace in that commitment.

I had planned an unusually long period of "tablework" at the beginning of the rehearsal process, devoted to presentations and discussions about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the attitudes and opinions of individual cast members, as well as the usual text work that accompanies most Shakespeare production. Without question, however, the presentations by our consultants proved to be the most useful aspect of this part of the process. I had decided to invite our Israeli and Palestinian consultants to rehearsal on different evenings, both to avoid any potential conflict between them and also to allow the company an opportunity to digest one point of view before they were subjected to a

second. Accordingly, Gerry and Rachelle arrived on the third day of rehearsal to address the cast about Israeli history and the Israeli perspective about the Palestinian struggle. Gerry spoke first, and without any notes delivered an extraordinary history lecture, beginning with the ancient presence of Jews in the region, moving swiftly to the birth of the Zionist movement, recounting the lobbying efforts to United Kingdom diplomats that resulted in the Balfour Declaration (the first official British document to call for the establishment of a Jewish state in the Middle east), the establishment of Israel amid Arab attempts to resist it in the aftermath of the Second World War, the 1967 war that resulted in Israel controlling additional territory, including the West Bank, and the troubled relationship with both Palestinians and other Arab neighbors ever since. He spoke articulately and with great apparent authority for almost two hours. I observed that the cast remained attentive, asking relatively few questions but clearly interested in his narrative.

Then Rachelle spoke, narrating her experiences as an Israeli citizen and soldier. She spoke almost exclusively in terms of her own experiences, occasionally referencing a historical force or event, but focusing on the personal. On more than one occasion, she was overcome with emotion, describing the death of a fellow soldier or the terror of constant bombardment by Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, and I could plainly see that she had struck a chord with the actors that Gerry had not. A number of actors were obviously moved, several to tears. She was peppered with questions, most addressing emotional or cultural

experience, and by the time rehearsal ended, I sensed a different level of engagement on the part of the company, one that was visceral as well as intellectual. After the departure of our guests there was a spirited level of discussion that injected a new note of urgency into the process.

As I reflected on the events of that evening, I recognized that the rehearsal had supplied direct evidence of what I was after in the production. The actors had responded to Rachelle's heart-felt emotion with some measure of empathy, elevating their interest and engagement in her account of life in Israel to a plane that was more complex than intellectual apprehension alone. I suspected that part of this reaction was due to the specific needs of actors trying to embody characters foreign to them. Rachelle provided them with emotional and cultural references that were more theatrically compelling than a more detached recitation of historical or political "facts." I cautioned the company to resist formulating significant positions, either politically or theatrically, until they had heard from the other side, a point quickly reinforced by Zaki, who had offered polite skepticism about much of what our guests had presented.

Yaser arrived on the fifth day of rehearsal. He was not as articulate as Gerry, nor as emotional as Rachelle, but he had come prepared. He began with a brief recitation of the Palestinian version of the historical "facts," which, of course, differed significantly from the history we had heard several evenings earlier, focusing on the dispossession of indigenous populations and the long history of UN resolutions disapproving various Israeli positions and activities. But

Yaser was most impressive when he distributed photocopied maps of the occupied territories that traced the establishment since 1967 of Jewish settlements and others which identified Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks. As he told stories, culled from the experiences of his own family, about the inability of Palestinian people to secure timely medical treatment because of the roadblocks, about the level of poverty and deprivation endemic in the occupied territories, and about what he saw as a systematic process by which his people were stripped of dignity, I detected a rising tide of sympathy, taking the form of a warmth of verbal tone and increasingly open and engaging body language, from many cast members (and polite resistance from a few others). Once again, the appeal to emotion, coupled with information, had elicited a powerful response. And Yaser, like Rachelle, was besieged with questions about the day-to-day life experience of Palestinians. We spent considerable time discussing the notion of Juliet as a rebellious (and secular) Palestinian teenager. By the time Yaser took his leave, the cast was visibly aroused and enthusiastic about the challenges of representing the cultures we had encountered so briefly.

Dramaturgical Decisions

The other part of our table work, other than the usual effort to decipher obscure language and undertake a dramaturgical analysis of the play, involved scrutinizing the text for language or references that seemed inappropriate given our production context. I had determined early on that I wanted to preserve the

integrity of the text insofar as possible. One immediate problem presented itself in the character of Friar Lawrence. In the text as written, both families are Catholic, and Friar Lawrence occupies a dramaturgical position as a sort of honest broker, able to command the respect of both feuding families on the basis of their common religious convictions. The Friar's speeches are peppered with references to Catholic ritual and practice. Clearly, in the world I was conjuring, a world characterized by the conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims, the imposition of a Catholic Friar would create endless confusion and complication. Moreover, his status as a Christian cleric would not enhance his capacity to function as someone who moved easily between the two families' worlds.

After much thought (and a return to many of my research materials), I reimagined him as a physician, a volunteer working in the West Bank with Médicins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders). These dedicated humanitarian workers have a significant presence in the West Bank, and while they primarily serve the Palestinian community, they certainly enjoy a measure of respect in all sectors of the population and have more freedom of movement than most civilians. As I pondered the various implications of this strategy, I became convinced that an iconoclastic *Doctor* Lawrence, who dabbles in homeopathic remedies, might well befriend the curious and eager Romeo and sympathize with his youthful passion. After I edited out most specific references to Catholic ritual from his dialogue, I would simply have to find a way to establish his identity early

in the play. That consideration, along with my need to quickly establish the specific context of this production, led me to a decision about how to begin the play. Instead of beginning conventionally with Shakespeare's famous prologue with its explication of the two feuding households and their two star-crossed lovers, I chose to begin the play with an Islamic call to prayer (performed by Zaki in Arabic on a platform overlooking the stage) that gave way to a brief wordless street scene, replete with Hassidic Jews promenading across the stage, distastefully encountering Arab street merchants who returned physical gestures of hostility, even while conducting business with secular Israelis. This very brief sequence, together with Scott Olinger's scenic design, dominated by "buildings" seemingly made of the ancient, slightly yellow stone common in the area, established the setting as contemporary Jerusalem and led immediately into the entrance of Samson, Gregory *et al.* and the brawl between the men of the two houses, now identified as Israelis and Palestinians.

The brawl, which lasted approximately three minutes, involved complex staging that was designed to do several things: evoke the context of Arab/Israeli conflict, introduce *Doctor* Lawrence, and establish a sense of theatricality, in which metaphoric flourishes and non-realistic staging were intended to provide license to the audience's imagination, even while rooting the spectators in a specific geo-political reality. The fighting was choreographed to be vivid and brutal, using a combination of hand-to-hand combat techniques and modern weaponry. Some of the fighting took place in real time, and some of it was

simultaneously performed in slow motion. One self-contained combat sequence, involving Tybalt and Benvolio and a few more combatants, was staged so that it was repeated ritualistically, suggesting the endless nature of the conflict. The entire brawl was underscored with driving contemporary (and heavily sampled) Arabic club music.[22] Amidst the confusion of the fighting, four women, representing both Israelis and Palestinians, ran and moved through the jumble of fighting bodies waving long blood-red silk banners. Visually, this added additional movement, color and excitement to the scene, but of course, the banners also suggested the blood that was continually flowing as a result of the conflict.

During the fight, a shot rang out and one of the Palestinian combatants fell to the ground downstage. After a moment, the doctor appeared upstage, wearing a "Médicins Sans Frontières" jacket and carrying a doctor's bag. He moved through the gyrating bodies downstage until he reached the fallen man, then knelt in a vain attempt to provide medical attention to the fatally wounded young man. Only then did the Prince (here conceived as the Mayor of Jerusalem) arrive on the balcony, where he stood with several heavily armed Israeli soldiers, surveying the chaos below. After a Palestinian woman hurled rocks at him (which also trailed red silken tails), the Prince repeatedly fired his

[22] Music was one of the most important design elements of this production. I chose to select all the music myself, following months of research and listening. My objective was to find music evocative of the cultures being staged, but keyed to or supportive of specific dramatic moments. I ended up using both traditional and contemporary Arabic music and a good deal of klezmer music, again both traditional and modern. Music was a constant presence in this production, used to provide transitional interest between scenes and to underscore selected moments and sequences.

sidearm in the air, causing the combatants to pause while he delivered his angry remarks.

Only after the Prince finished, and the stage was cleared of combatants, did Doctor Lawrence rise from the body of the fatally injured brawler, peel off his surgical gloves, and directly engaging the audience, deliver the famous lines of the prologue. That prologue, of course, not only previews the tragic results of Romeo's and Juliet's passion for each other, but foregrounds that tragedy in Verona amidst "two households both alike in dignity." These words served notice of the moral and functional equivalence of two sides, which in America at least, are not usually seen as morally equivalent. And by shattering any fourth wall conventions and directly engaging the audience, Lawrence drew them into the world of the performance, subtly suggesting a level of complicity, or at least participation, in the events that were being represented.

I decided early on that we would not try to represent our context with news footage realism. It was important to me that we remained in a theatrical universe, where metaphor was a conventionalized system of communication. We never used blood, for example, although, the brawl included expressionistic flourishes involving dance-like movement with red silk banners and violent tableaux in repetitive cycles as well as more realistic fight choreography. We allowed textual reference to "Verona" to stand, though it was clear that this particular Verona was a metaphor and bore more resemblance to Jerusalem than to any Italian city.

The burden of sustaining our Middle eastern context was carried by three production elements: the set itself, designed by Scott Olinger, which evoked the ancient stone architecture of Jerusalem, complete with Hebrew and Arabic graffiti and an assortment of bullet holes; the costumes by Lindsay Stang, which faithfully represented the odd mixtures of modernity and tradition that one observes in Jerusalem; and the transitional music and underscoring, that I chose to evoke both Israeli and Arabic traditions and to reinforce the emotional colors of particular theatrical moments. One additional production element supported our context. I had retained Marie Sage, a local expert in Middle Eastern dance, to choreograph the dance sequence in the Capulet banquet where Romeo and Juliet meet. Marie proved invaluable, not only as a choreographer, but also as a source of information about Arabic gestural vocabularies and social behavior (always subject to the confirmation of our consulting experts) that lent another layer of authenticity to the work of the actors and richness to the metaphors they were creating.

Ultimately, I changed very little else in the text (aside from some modest cutting for sense and pace) with one significant exception. In the original text, the discovery of Romeo's and Juliet's bodies are followed by a long section (approximately 150 lines) in which Friar Lawrence essentially recapitulates to the Prince the events that have resulted in the deaths and his part in them. None of the information is new. Dramaturgically, the section provides an opportunity for Lawrence to acknowledge his responsibility and by virtue of his forthrightness to

redeem himself. I felt that Lawrence's speeches were anti-climactic. More importantly, I believed that this extremely talky sequence diluted the emotional impact of the teenagers' deaths and their families' reactions to them. And I was concerned that the diminution of emotional impact would exact a toll on the empathic reactions I wanted to elicit from the audience.

During my extensive musical research, I had fixed upon an instrumental performance by the band, The Klezmatics, which was essentially a clarinet improvisation within the sonic landscape of Klezmer music. Beginning quietly and plaintively, the musical selection had a processional quality that built in volume and intensity until it virtually exploded in a painful climax, finally subsiding in a sad little denouement. The piece struck me as especially appropriate to underscore a scene that dealt with grief and all things funereal. And I was especially interested, throughout this production, in the capacity of musical selections to carry emotional cues. After much deliberation, but before rehearsals had begun, I decided to cut the one hundred and fifty or so lines in question. I substituted a wordless sequence in which, to the accompaniment of this music, both the Montagues and Capulets moved slowly onto the stage, discovering the bodies of their children with heart-breaking physical manifestations of their grief. They were joined, as the music built to an emotional crescendo, by others in the community and finally the Prince, who regarded both families with evident dismay until the music climaxed.

As the music began its descent from that climax, he asked, "Where be

these enemies?" And the final twenty lines of the text, in which there is an uneasy reconciliation between the two families, were performed. I was not content to allow the suggestion that the death of these innocents could resolve the conflict, so I contrived a more ambiguous ending. Following the Prince's famous final speech, which concludes:

> Some shall be pardoned and some punishéd
> For never was a story of more woe
> Than this of Juliet and her Romeo

I chose to have the families exit on opposite sides of the stage. Just before their disappearance, Capulet and Montague paused and simultaneously looked back at each other with an apparent distrust that immediately called the reconciliation into question. As they exited, Doctor Lawrence was the only remaining live body on stage. As a haunting song in Hebrew played, he regarded the dead bodies sorrowfully and then slowly turned on the audience, implicating them too in the tragedy that had unfolded. I imagine that very few people in the audience could translate the lyrics they were hearing, but if they had been able to do so, they would have heard:

> The sun will set behind the hill
> Love will come to Loneliness
> Who sits weeping on a golden stone.
>
> The sun will set behind the hill
> The Golden Peacock will come
> And take all of us to the place we long for.

The character of the music itself, quite apart from the lyrics, expressed a kind of utopian longing.

As Marjorie Garber points out, the characters left on stage at the end of Shakespeare's text (the Prince, both families and Lawrence, among others) should not be understood as having absorbed the lessons of the lovers' deaths.

> These witnesses, all remnants of an older world of law, have had the experience and missed the meaning. The task of understanding what has transpired is left to the audience, which is part of the group enjoined by the Prince to 'Go hence,' out of the theater, 'to have more talk of these sad things.' In effect there are two audiences, one on and one off the stage. . . The movement beyond tragedy is left to the spectators (212).

My staging, with the exit of the families suggesting a still unresolved conflict and with Doctor Lawrence turning to the spectators, was designed to emphasize this process of moving the argument of the play from the stage into the audience, where, I hoped, there would be further conversation, flecked with compassion, about "these sad things."

Throughout the production, I took care to focus on the humanity of the Capulets and their allies. Capulet himself was depicted as a loving father and failed husband prone to bouts of irrational rage. Lady Capulet's self-absorption was softened by her parental awkwardness and hunger for love. Paris was presented as a totally honorable and attractive suitor who had the misfortune to be rejected by the object of his affection. At every opportunity, I chose to depict

characters who were profoundly human and subject to both playfulness and pain. My wonderful cast embodied the ideas of this production with great depth and compassion of their own.

Reception

As I have suggested, before the show opened, I was apprehensive about the response. Even before rehearsals began, any number of people had cautioned me about this production concept, suggesting that it might be perceived as either trivializing or exploiting the conflict, which seemed to be escalating daily toward ever more extreme horrors. I sought to preempt some of that feeling in a program note. I wrote that:

> I truly believe that no subject is off limits for art. If art is one means of generating insight and understanding, then the horror of a conflict that inspires polarizing hatred and despair appropriately invites the transforming eye of the artist. Shakespeare's insights about the fruits of hatred have never been more relevant. Our emotional engagement with theatrical conflict and death does not in any way diminish our capacity to respond to the real thing. On the contrary, empathy in the theatre is not unlike empathy outside it, and if there is any kind of human intervention that can withstand the hatreds born of history, fear and desperation, it is an

> empathetic one. Only if we truly understand *and feel for* all sides of a conflict as divisive as that which presently consumes the Middle East, can there be any real prospect of resolution and reconciliation. Theatre is an arena of feeling. And this *Romeo and Juliet*, which does not seek to advance any political agenda, will hopefully invite its audiences to feel the consequences of political agendas that become distorted by hatred.

As it turned out, public response to the production was overwhelmingly positive. To be sure, some audience members and one newspaper reviewer expressed despair that this was not a "traditional" production. One thoughtful academic opined that the dissonance between the original text and the contemporary context was distracting. But the vast preponderance of opinion was positive.

Audience members were obviously moved, audible sobbing could be heard and tear-streaked faces observed at the play's end. Newspaper reviewers, with the exception of the one traditionalist, were extremely generous in their praise. The most frequent comment expressed to me by audience members was that the context imparted a weight, an emotional immediacy, and a reality to *Romeo and Juliet* that was different from past productions they had witnessed and very welcome. One sophisticated theatergoer commented to me that he had been highly skeptical about the production concept before coming, had resisted it throughout most of the play, but finally succumbed at its

conclusion, when the Prince pronounced that “all are punished.” Another theatergoer commented in an e-mail to me that “the ending of the play reduced the intellectual equivocation that typifies attitudes about the conflict to a horrifyingly simple emotional truth.” In other words, his cognitive process had been conditioned by his emotional response. I felt relieved and vindicated – relieved that the play had worked in its most fundamental theatrical terms and vindicated in my belief that theatrical empathy could be an intellectual as well as an emotional force.

I have no basis to make a claim for the experience of theatrical wonder as part of this production. I was too exclusively focused on the operation of empathy to consider that operation together with the perception of metaphor as part of a phenomenon of theatrical reception. And even though my belief in the level of compassion generated by this production is deep and strong, my evidence is anecdotal. As much as I long for the validation of a utopian performative based on empathy and compassion, I cannot pretend that this production advanced the cause of peace or alleviated the endless suffering in a deadly conflict whose victims enjoy no poetry, no carefully wrought dramatic structure, no intermission, and no escape into metaphor. But I do believe that in the complex fusion of intellect and emotion that is the theatre, world-traveling and profound insights born of empathy are possible. Denzin says: “A performance authorizes itself, not through the citation of scholarly texts, but through its ability to evoke and invoke shared emotional experience and understanding between

performer and audience" (192). And I believe that as the sun set behind the hill that forms the background of the Riverside Festival stage, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* transported many of us to the place we long for, where the pain and passion of our humanity is acknowledged, explored, and honored for its still unrealized potential.

Chapter Five

Tragedy and Wonder: Albee's *The Goat*

I want to expand the province of theatrical wonder. I have argued that theatrical wonder, a reception phenomenon that is characterized by a convergence of emotional response in the form of empathy and imaginative flight occasioned by the perception and understanding of novel metaphor, produces delight. I have argued further that wonder in some circumstances has much in common with a utopian performative in that it produces an affective awareness of possibility, and therefore has, at least on some occasions, considerable use in the pursuit of progressive political goals. But wonder is not characterized only by the delight of the spectator. It may also be present in that aspect of awe that relates to dread, when that dread is itself the result of profound emotion in a metaphoric field that requires understanding. Wonder may, in fact, be associated with a response to tragedy, and the reception of tragedy may also serve a progressive political agenda. Aristotle's well-known characterization of the idealized response to tragedy is that the experience yields pity and fear. I believe that pity here may be a functional equivalent to empathy, and fear, which requires a certain imaginative projection by the spectator coupled with a fundamental level of understanding, may serve as an analogue to the hermeneutic process that extracts meaning from metaphor. And while it is true that theorists from Brecht to Boal have denied the political efficacy associated

with catharsis, or tragic response, a great deal of contemporary theory supports the opposite conclusion.

It is in this context that I take up a consideration of Edward Albee's recent play *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* and my production of the play in 2004. Albee has subtitled his play *Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*, this despite his usual classification as a writer in the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd. I will argue that these writerly identity positions are not mutually exclusive, and that Albee's play seeks to elicit powerful emotions in a context where important ideas are cloaked in metaphor. In my production, I attempted to honor Albee's intentions, and in the process witnessed the evocation of a form of theatrical wonder characterized more by awe than delight, but one which nonetheless enables the conception of a more open and tolerant society.

I saw the Broadway production of *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* in the spring of 2002, shortly after it opened to mixed but generally favorable reviews and considerable controversy. The play depicts the impact of a revelation of a sexual and emotional relationship between a man and a goat on the privileged, successful family of which the man in question is a member. The play had an immense impact on me. I was moved and disturbed by the destruction visited upon its principal characters, yet I found much of the early part of the play genuinely funny. I was struck both by the extent to which the play forced me to confront my own assumptions about sexual norms and the extent to which the play served as a sort of meditation on the nature of tragedy and its place in our

lives. I was not enthusiastic about all the performances, especially those of the two supporting characters, but I guessed that my reticence was the product of acting choices rather than a textual weakness. As I left the theatre that night, I noticed the tell-tale signs of my response to especially stimulating texts. I was physically antsy, unable to sit still and process the experience in an orderly way. My thinking was an uneasy and volatile mix of flashing, slightly unfocused images and snatches of unformed ideas. My desire to engage this text in a more intimate and rigorous way was palpable.

Less than two years later, in January of 2004, I opened my own production of this play at Riverside Theatre in Iowa City. By then, I had folded my ideas about Albee's script into the theoretical matrix that represents my attempt to explore theatrical wonder, especially in terms of its relationship to theatrical empathy and the attachment of metaphor that heightens and amplifies the range and implications of such empathy.

Edward Albee and the Tragic

Edward Albee has earned his place in the pantheon of "great American playwrights." Now in his late seventies and still writing, Albee has produced a body of work over the last four and a half decades that has earned him three Pulitzer Prizes[23] (for *A Delicate Balance*, 1966; *Seascape*, 1974; and *Three Tall*

[23] When *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* debuted on Broadway in October 1962, it encountered considerable controversy, despite some critical reaction that hailed it as a major achievement. Many theatre-goers were shocked by its strong language, sensuality, and undercurrents of discontent with American institutions. Controversy reached a climax when the Pulitzer Prize drama jury selected the play

Women, 1991), two Tony awards for best play, (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1963) and *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* (2002), the Kennedy Center Commendation for Lifetime Achievement (1996), and the National Medal of Arts (1996). Yet little consensus exists about his rightful place in a critical continuum. He has been analyzed as a sort of literary soul mate to Pirandello (Paolucci 2003: 21-22). He has been celebrated as a determined critic of social complacency (Amacher 22). Individual plays have been interpreted, praised and critiqued as everything from metaphysical explorations of ontological quandaries to coded meditations about homoerotic impulses. Albee himself has expressed a somewhat bemused reaction to scholarly appraisals of his work: "I read these books about me. I'm sent numbers of copies of books about me and scholarly papers, and I read them the way I do fiction" (Wasserman 20).

Above all, however, he has been hailed, from early in his career, as the primary American exponent of the "Theatre of the Absurd" (Cohn 6). Martin Esslin, who coined the term "theatre of the absurd" in his 1961 book of the same name, ushered in the long association of Albee with absurdism in his 1969 revision of his book, in which he devoted four pages to Albee, characterizing his work as belonging to the category of the Theatre of the Absurd in part because of his attack on the foundation of American optimism (267). With reference to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Esslin argues that an element of dream and

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for the award that year. The trustees of Columbia University, overseers of the awards and quite sensitive to the impassioned controversy swirling around the play, rejected the recommendation of the jury, resulting in the resignations of two of its members. As a result of the struggle over Albee's work, no Pulitzer Prize in that category was awarded in 1962.

allegory (especially the imaginary child) and Albee's "Genet-like" preoccupation with rituals and games justifies the categorizing of this play as beholden to the traditions of the absurd (268-269).

Esslin understands the term Theatre of the Absurd to refer to a theatre that instead of purporting to represent a universal truth or series of truths, represents the highly idiosyncratic insights of one individual's sense of being in the world, a highly personal, and often darkly comical, intuition about the human situation which may be expressed in dream-like or illogical ways, in images and fragments of perception that give the lie to prior attempts to render "reality" as coherent and universally experienced, that pierce the veil of illusions that has been drawn to protect us. Albee, who is (or was) in substantial agreement with Esslin has been quoted as explaining that "[t]he Theatre of the Absurd is an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense – which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed" (quoted in Amacher 20). Albee's rhetorical resort to political and social structures, however, suggests an interest in issues that extend beyond purely personal perceptions. Indeed, I contend that Albee has always been, and continues to be, a social critic eager to nudge his audiences toward a more progressive view of those very political and social structures. I will argue that *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* has a clear political and

social agenda – that of urging more tolerant attitudes in law and culture about sexual behavior.

Despite the association of absurdist theatre with peculiarly 20th century themes, especially the impact and aftermath of existentialist thinking, Esslin relates the theatre he describes to a tradition that is as old as theatre itself:

> Concerned as it is with the ultimate realities of the human condition, the relatively few fundamental problems of life and death, isolation and communication, the Theatre of the Absurd, however grotesque, frivolous, and irreverent it may appear, represents a return to the original, religious function of the theatre – the confrontation of man with myth and religious reality. Like ancient Greek tragedy and the medieval mystery plays and baroque allegories, the Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe (353).

This notion of connecting the concerns of the Theatre of the Absurd with more longstanding theatrical traditions clearly resonates in Albee's work, especially insofar as connections are made to the traditions of classical Greek theatre.

Albee's interest in classical themes and motifs is of long standing. His earlier work demonstrates a fascination with Greek tragic traditions that gestures toward his overt determination in *The Goat* to explore the meaning of tragedy.

Richard Amacher has noted that Albee's first work, *The Zoo Story* (1959), can be seen as containing elements of Greek tragedy in terms of its plotting (which rests upon a series of cause and effect episodes) and especially in its use of a reversal, various discoveries and a sense of recognition in the Aristotelian sense (41). According to Amacher, when Jerry rushes on the knife-holding Peter (the episode representing a plot reversal), "the playgoer experiences a genuine catharsis of pity and fear" (42). He goes on to reflect that

> With the realization of what he has done, Peter changes from his earlier tolerance for Jerry to horror of what Jerry has made him – a murderer. *Horror* [emphasis in original] is perhaps not the same as Aristotle's 'hate,' but Albee does speak of love and hate together as the teaching emotion; and such a mixture of love and hate is the emotional state of both protagonist and antagonist as the drama closes. . . . Thus the absurdity of survival in the twentieth century is dramatized with peculiarly Grecian effectiveness. (42)

More than one critic has noted that Albee set *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in a fictional location called New Carthage. According to legend, the original Carthage was founded in the ninth century B.C.E. by Dido. The maritime city was a rival to the Greek city states and was the principal adversary of ancient Rome in the Punic Wars. St Augustine described the city as "a cauldron of unholy loves" (quoted in Cohn 25). Cohn observes that in *Who's Afraid of*

Virginia Woolf? Albee makes effective allegorical use of this historical conjunction of sex and power, transferring its associations to the specifically American stew represented by the marital warfare of George and Martha (ibid).[24] Forty-four years after *The Zoo Story* and forty years after *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee has continued his fascination with classical theatre and a cauldron of "unholy love," now in much more overt fashion. *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* was published with the parenthetical subtitle: *Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy.*

The plot of *The Goat* is quite simple. In the first of three scenes (played without an intermission), we are introduced to a middle-aged married couple, Martin and Stevie. They are apparently in the prime of their lives. Martin, who is turning fifty, is a world class architect, both famous and famously successful. Stevie, who seems to fulfill a rather old-fashioned notion of wife and home-maker, at least in terms of her vocation, is depicted immediately as Martin's equal in wit and intellect. We learn, too, that they have a much loved seventeen-year-old son, Billy, who is gay. They share an easy intimacy and a clear affection that is only slightly unsettled by Martin's sense of distraction and Stevie's slightly suspicious awareness of it. They are awaiting the arrival of Ross, a public television producer and Martin's oldest friend, who is coming to tape a television interview with Martin. As the doorbell rings, Stevie voices her partly serious concern that Martin may be having an affair. His response is a

[24] In a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* that I directed in Tampa in 1988, I chose to emphasize this classical motif (and what I saw then as a titanic clash between god-like characters) by working with my scenic designer, Eric Veenstra, to create a set that evoked classical themes by utilizing pillars surrounding a (living room) pit that resembled the orchestra of an amphitheatre with an elevated area for the bar that represented a sort of sacrificial altar.

brief parody of some Noel Coward dialogue, a theatrically overwrought and humorous exchange in which Stevie gleefully joins. Martin ends the exchange with a confession that he has fallen in love with a certain Sylvia, who happens to be a goat. Stevie, taken aback momentarily, treats this as a joke and admits Ross. She leaves the men to their interview as she leaves the house to run errands.

Ross's attempted interview is a means of exposition. We learn that Martin has just won the Pritzker Prize, a prestigious award in the world of architecture. Moreover, he has been selected to lead a monumental and highly coveted project, the multi-billion dollar creation of a model city. When Martin is too distracted to continue the interview, Ross attempts to draw him out. We learn, to Ross's amused astonishment, that Martin has always been faithful to Stevie – until recently. Martin eventually confesses that he has met Sylvia, fallen in love with her, and for six months has been enmeshed in an affair. As the scene concludes, Martin shows Ross a photograph of Sylvia. She is a goat. Ross, expressing his outrage and concern for Martin's mental health warns him that he must talk to Stevie about this, or Ross will tell her himself.

The second scene begins in the midst of a family confrontation, where Stevie and the teenage Billy confront Martin with a letter that Stevie has received from Ross, informing her (in Billy's words) that Martin is "fucking a goat." After Martin, in an extreme emotional state, makes some ugly observations about Billy's homosexuality and immediately recoils with guilt and regret, the teenager

is sent to his room, and the scene becomes a tense confrontation between the husband and wife, she expressing her sense of outraged betrayal in ever escalating terms and he seeking to explain a love, “an epiphany,” that is beyond reason or sense. The scene careens back and forth between moments of uncomfortable humor and moments of almost unbearable pain, during the course of which much pottery is broken and furniture overturned, leaving this stylish architect’s environment a shambles. By the end of the scene, Billy has reappeared briefly only to flee the house in a state of adolescent anguish, and Stevie, in a chilling final face-off with Martin, bellows that he has brought her down and that she will bring him down as well. She storms out of the house, leaving Martin alone and desolate.

The third and final scene begins a few hours later, when Billy returns to find his father alone amidst the destruction that was once his well-appointed home. Billy angrily confronts his father, but ultimately expresses the love and need he feels for him. Billy tearfully melts into his father’s arms, but as he seeks consolation there, the moment turns unexpectedly sexual, and Billy attempts to kiss Martin passionately. Martin thrusts him away – then in a moment of simple parental compassion folds Billy into his arms again. In the meantime, Ross has entered the house again unseen by Martin and Billy, and he witnesses this intimate moment between father and son. As he expresses his righteous outrage, Martin turns to his traumatized son and tells him a story about how he was once sexually aroused by a baby in his lap, but discovered that it really

meant nothing. It was, according to Martin, a simple physical response rather than an indication of something deeper. Billy is left to wonder whether he was the infant in the story while Ross and Martin face each other in a duet of condemnation by Ross and expressions of the need for tolerance by Martin. As Martin articulates his sense of aloneness, Stevie reappears covered in blood and dragging the corpse of Sylvia, whom she has slaughtered.

The play ends after a brief anguished exchange between Martin and Stevie. Martin howls in solitary agony, Stevie stands in the stunned aftermath of her violent act, Ross looks on in shock, and Billy pathetically tries to capture the attention of one or the other of his stricken parents. The final moment of the play is a tableau of utter misery and devastation, an expression of the tragic.

As someone attuned to dramatic literature from an early age, I had acquired a conception of tragedy at some point during high school, probably rendered by a teacher with a special affinity for "the glory that was Greece." Long before I encountered the *Poetics* as a primary text, I had an understanding of tragedy that went something like this: A person of noble birth or high social stature is burdened with a personal flaw that, when combined with rather mysterious cosmic forces, which may or may not have something to do with destiny, is brought low, to a point of almost unspeakable suffering. Somehow, the spectator's experience of that misery purges him (in those days, it was always "him") of bad feelings, allowing for a kind of social and personal regeneration.

Certainly, *The Goat* seems to meet many of the elements of this simple definition of tragedy. Martin, as one of the world's most renowned architects, is a person of elevated stature. His flaw seems to reside in his inability to conform to normative sexual behavior, especially when caught up in the thralls of a force that is a variant of, or somehow resembles, love. His reversal of fortune and level of personal agony, like that of his family, is indisputable. "So classic is *The Goat's* structure that a reader or playgoer can almost postulate the choral ode . . . that might follow the play's first and second episodes or scenes" (Kuhn 15). I will return to the issue of audience reception, but clearly Albee's play is draped in traditional tragic clothing. His project, however, as announced in his subtitle, was not simply to render a tragedy, but to seek to define it.

Tragedy, Emotional Response, and Theatrical Wonder

The critical engagement of tragedy is rather more complex, of course, than my high school formulation suggested. George Steiner argues that recent attempts to gain a theoretical purchase on tragedy, coming from intellectual traditions as various as anthropological, ritual, structuralist, post-structuralist, feminist, deconstructionist, and linguistic, have done little to address the fundamental definitional question of what actually constitutes tragedy (535). He hazards his own definition that tragedy is a dramatic representation of a highly specific world-view. "It entails the view that human life *per se*, both ontologically and existentially, is an affliction . . . that men and women's presence on this earth

is fundamentally absurd or unwelcome, that our lives are not a gift or a natural unfolding, but a self-punishing anomaly (Steiner 536)." On first blush, this seems like a definition that dovetails nicely with the Theatre of the Absurd as Esslin has described it. The conclusion of Albee's play, in its most fundamental terms, where a perfectly happy and successful group of people has been virtually and actually destroyed, without any hope of relief or redemption, suggests something akin to Steiner's affliction. But Steiner's understanding of tragedy is offered as a general statement of universal application, and the Theatre of the Absurd, if nothing else, is idiosyncratically subjective, the highly personal perception of the world by an individual artist in highly specific circumstances. More importantly, Steiner offers a cool intellectual analysis that does not incorporate the emotional reaction of the spectator as part of the fundamental essence of the dramatic phenomenon that he seeks to define.

Albee is clearly seeking to elicit emotional reactions from his spectators. One way in which this exercise in understanding the tragic *does* invoke the absurd is in its use of humor, its insistence on provoking laughter. "*The Goat* can be termed theatrically 'absurd' in its openly discussed mixing of very dark and very hilarious comedy into its tragedy, especially in its rapid and non-linear alternations of the zanily (or hysterically) comic and seriously sad" (Kuhn 25). The sadness and pain suffered by the principal characters in *The Goat* also seem to demand an emotional response from the audience, a reaction predicated upon the spectator's almost grudging connection to those characters.

Both as a theorist and as a practitioner, I am vitally interested in that emotional reaction. I believe that reaction involves the stimulation of an empathic response, in Martin's case an empathic response to someone engaged in behavior which is highly distasteful to most spectators. Edward Albee's "notes toward a definition of tragedy" challenges us to explore the limits of our capacity for empathy and invites us to ponder the tension between forces in our lives as fundamental as love and sexuality with the constraints imposed upon them by social convention and regulation. In other words, Albee is using the nuances of tragic reception to invite us to consider realms of behavior and experience quite foreign to most of us.

All theoretical considerations about tragedy begin, of course, with Aristotle. While the primacy of the *Poetics* in western theatrical and literary theory is not seriously disputed, there are considerable differences of opinion about almost every interpretive detail of this foundational work (Carlson 16). The most unified definition of tragedy within the *Poetics* appears in chapter 6, where tragedy is described as "an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" (Aristotle 11).

The concept of catharsis, which relates to the emotional dimension of tragedy at issue here, was never fully developed or explained in the extant writings of Aristotle. Its interpretation has occasioned constant scholarly controversy. The most common interpretation treats *catharsis* as a kind of medical term, relating to the alleged phenomenon by which the passions aroused in spectators by tragedy are purged or cleansed. An alternative view considers catharsis from a moral perspective, where the impact of the tragic experience on the spectator is understood as purification, and an intellectual enlightenment about how disturbing emotions may fit within a harmonious conception of the world. Still other scholars have urged the idea that catharsis is a structural or artistic term, representing the means by which the plot is returned to a sense of equilibrium from a state of disruption (Carlson 18). Charles Segal points out that prominent classical scholars in recent years "have argued strongly that catharsis refers to an *intellectual* [italics in original] clarification, either of the events or the emotions, rather than to emotional, medical, or ritual purification or purgation" (153), but he goes on to argue that Aristotle *is* concerned with the emotional reaction of an audience to a tragedy. For Aristotle, he says, "the emotions also have a cognitive basis and presumably can be 'clarified' by intellectual processes" (155). Like empathy, therefore, catharsis, the pity and fear contemplated by Aristotle, must be understood as having both a cognitive and an affective dimension. Pity may be akin to sympathy, but pity and fear, taken

together, require a process of identification that either resembles empathy or is, in fact, empathy by another name.

My argument is that empathic response, with its intellectual and emotional constituents, is a necessary part of the process by which an audience may be moved to wonder, and I have further claimed that wonder, by virtue of its power in the realm of the deeply *felt* imaginary, is a phenomenon with potential for social and political impact. In a world view that denies the Cartesian division between mind and body, between cognition and emotion, there must be an acknowledgment that emotional response can have real efficacy in terms of a societal consideration of vital issues. I believe that Aristotle, who after all was defending the beneficial aspects of poetry from Plato's assault on art as too dangerous for inclusion in The Republic, understood this as part of his analysis of tragedy. I contend, too, that Edward Albee has incorporated this idea into his own exploration of tragedy in the context of *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* where his aim is not only an exercise in definition, but also a plea for tolerance of sexual difference that has far-ranging political and social implications. Much like a utopian performative, which evokes an affective apprehension of possibility, Albee is engineering a theatrical occasion where our emotional response compels an acknowledgment that our own sexual codes and assumed values may not be as neatly circumscribed as we might have believed.

This valorization of emotional response flies in the face of a great deal of influential theory about politically efficacious theatre. Bertolt Brecht famously

railed against empathy as a phenomenon that narcotized audiences, impairing their capacity for detached analysis and the political action that could presumably flow from such an analysis. Boal has argued that catharsis is politically conservative in that its purging effect does not require action to affect social change. These various expressions of skepticism about the political agency of emotional identification have been undermined by more contemporary understandings about emotional response and its place in political discourse.

The basic tenets of Brecht's theoretical formulations for a politically effective theatre are well known. They include his call for a theatre stripped of illusionistic practices, his use of the so-called alienation effect as an acting technique, the use of music, slides, and various forms of commentary as techniques to compel ruptures in the narrative and in the emotional involvement of spectators, his formulation of the notion of *gestus* as a technique for staging – all the theoretical adjustments to theatrical practice that Brecht collected under the rubric of "epic theatre." All of these adjustments were calculated to facilitate the process of thoughtful consideration and political analysis by the audience, which also meant, for Brecht, the avoidance of emotional involvement by the audience in the events of the play.

One of Brecht's most famous ideas, particularly with regard to styles of acting, is encapsulated in the German term *verfremdungseffekt*. The traditional English translation of this term as "alienation effect" has caused considerable confusion and often led to a misapprehension that Brecht favored an acting style

that was stiff, formal and devoid of emotion. Brecht himself, by the time he wrote *A Short Organum for the Theatre,* debunks this reading of his intentions:

> At no moment must he [the actor] go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played. The verdict: 'he didn't act Lear, he was Lear' would be an annihilating blow to him. He has just to show his character, or rather he has to do more than just get into it; this does not mean that if he is playing passionate parts he must himself remain cold. It is only that his feelings must not at bottom be those of the character, so that the audience's may not at bottom be those of the character either. (Willett 193-194)

Brecht is arguing for a style of performance that facilitates the critical awareness of the audience and avoids an emotional engagement on the part of both actor and audience that militates against such a critical engagement. John Fuegi argues persuasively that by the term *verfremdung* Brecht intended something "richly and provocatively ambivalent" (83). Brecht was seeking a theatrical means by which he could "disrupt the viewers' normal or run of the mill perception by introducing elements that will suddenly cause the viewer to see familiar objects in a strange way and to see strange objects in a familiar way" (83). In other words, "the task of the V-effect . . . is to reveal a suppressed or unconsidered alternative; to show the possibilities for change implicit in difference and contradiction" (Thompson and Sacks 194). Acting style, like other

aspects of epic theatre, is intended to create a condition in which critical analysis is encouraged. The actor attempting an "alienated" style by which he comments in some way on his character is simply seeking to create such a condition by discouraging a runaway empathy on the part of an audience that allows emotional response to overwhelm the capacity for an intellectual vantage point.

Brechtian theory, however, has demonstrated a certain functional elasticity. Elin Diamond, in appropriating the Brechtian concept of gestus for purposes of a feminist analysis of mimesis, observes that both "feminist theory and Brechtian theory are moving, changing discourses, open to multiple readings" (1997: 43). States provides an example of such a reading when he considers emotional responses to *Mother Courage* as written by Brecht that seem to vindicate the matrix of emotional response in tragedy, despite his misgivings:

> But as Brecht draws her, we are suspended in an Aristotelian paradox: she elicits both pity, the impulse to approach or to understand, and fear, the impulse to retreat (though in Brecht's critical theater we must substitute another word for tragic fear, perhaps outrage, in the sense that we know 'this should not be!'). But it is through this balance of conflicting feelings, of empathy and objectivity, that Brecht avoids the excesses of sentimentality and moral didacticism and creates a form of classical theater. This is

> not what Brecht had in mind, but it is what will make his plays producible long after *Verfremdungseffekt* is a dead word. (1985: 106)

Diamond reads the term *verfremdungseffekt*, however, in such a way as to insure a long life, describing it as "the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh" (1997: 45). She goes on to apply this concept to an interrogation of gender: "Understanding gender as ideology – as a system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of women and men which enforces a social status quo – is to appreciate the continued timeliness of *verfremdungseffekt*, the purpose of which always is to denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology – and performativity – makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable" (47). I suggest that Albee has a similar enterprise in mind in *The Goat*: to use the technique of tragedy to defamiliarize our notions of sexual propriety, to enable us to consider bestiality as an idea and a metaphor afresh, and, in the process, destabilize our ideas about sexuality in general.

Certainly the tradition of the tragic is one of engaging ideas. Even the most ardent proponent of a Brechtian perspective would grant that for the Athenians in 5th century Greece B.C.E., at least those Athenians classified as citizens, coming to grips with ideas and active political involvement was a cultural preoccupation. "Athens was animate with debate and argument, and public life was a kind of lived performance in which a community of interested (or simply

curious) parties could form at any moment" (Rehm 5). The Festival of Dionysus, with its competition for tragedians, was a cultural and religious civic institution that fostered political debate even as it sought to emotionally move its audiences by its demonstration of theatrical art.

Embracing the notion that cognitive and affective elements of audience response are not severable, classics scholar Ismene Lada argues the thesis that "although Greek theatre *justifies* Brecht's conception of the 'Aristotelian' auditorium as a space where 'everybody feels', emotion within the Greek dramatic frame is *a privileged way of attaining understanding, self-realization, and socio-cultural self-definition*" (Lada 398, emphasis in original). Citing decades worth of research in the social sciences that suggest that cognitive processes are the primary mechanism by which emotional reactions are elicited, she translates that research to a consideration of Aristotle's formulation for tragic response:

> To narrow the focus on the inherently 'tragic' emotions of 'pity' and 'fear,' the ability to reason well, together with a multitude of cognitive considerations, are the *sine qua non* parameters in the determination of an individual's proneness to the emotive state of pitying; fear, correspondingly, not only is elicited on the basis of a rational evaluation of the reality, proximity, and imminence of danger, but also leads to further deliberative and mental action (403).

Thus she argues that, in Greek tragedy, knowledge, which was culturally understood to be a precursor to action, was achieved through the emotional apprehension of someone's suffering or death.

> In Greek theatrical experience then, a fundamental channel of communication between author, performer, and their addressees is sustained through the transfusion of emotion, the identity of shared feelings. Moreover, in contrast to Brecht's – and Plato's! – evaluation that poetry's appeal to emotionality jeopardizes the individual's attempt at rational control, emotion is a privileged way of getting access to the truth, of reaching both understanding of others and, most importantly, self-realization (404).

I would complete Lada's line of argument by urging that the understanding and self-realization to which she refers is much more than a necessary antecedent to rational control; it is a prerequisite for informed and efficacious *action*. And while her argument is intended to rescue the Aristotelian consideration of Greek tragedy from Brechtian dismissal, I contend that these same insights apply to Edward Albee's much more contemporary experiment with tragic form. Many of the extant Greek tragedies addressed some kind of social malaise, a societal condition that required healing or some kind of intervention (Kuhn 28). Here Albee is addressing the social malaise of sexual intolerance. If Brecht was seeking a theatrical means by which he could disrupt the spectator's normal

perception by introducing elements that will cause that spectator to see the familiar as strange and the strange as familiar, then I believe that Albee accomplishes this in part by inviting our compassion in circumstances when it might otherwise be withheld, by invoking empathy in spite of our predisposition for judgment.

Metaphor as a Portal

While classical literature and mythology is replete with references to sex between humans and other creatures,[25] few could argue that bestiality or zoophilia (the terms are used almost indistinguishably, at least in popular discourse) is regarded as abhorrent by a clear majority of people in our culture. Twenty-eight of fifty states have laws specifically prohibiting sexual relations between humans and other species, and many others include bestiality within legal definitions of sodomy. The taboo is sufficiently deep that it is almost impossible to imagine a circumstance in which this particular sexual behavior could be described in mainstream cultural conversation without inviting disgust and condemnation.

Riverside Theatre, where I directed my production of *The Goat*, has a regular practice of offering a public forum about issues presented or suggested by its productions, led by a prominent local academic, *before* opening. These

[25] Zeus took the form of a swan to seduce Leda, for example. The minotaur was the offspring of Queen Pasiphae and a white bull. And of course the satyr, a half-man half-goat creature with particularly licentious appetites for nymphs and other females taking human form, was associated in myth with the ecstatic practices of Dionysus.

forums are typically attended by some of the most loyal and sophisticated members of the theatre's regular audience. At the well-attended forum that preceded the opening of this play, there was considerable discussion about Edward Albee and his propensity for theatrical provocation, but as the conversation turned to the specific subject of bestiality as a subject for theatrical exploration, substantial numbers of the audience expressed a level of distaste that I have never heard before in similar settings. More than one offered observations to the effect that he or she would find it difficult to sit through such a production, and in response to a specific question, many in the audience indicated that they would find it impossible to sympathize with a character involved in that particular variety of sexual behavior.

Almost as soon as rehearsals began, I was informed by the artistic leaders of the company that they had received an angry telephone call from one of their most prominent and generous supporters demanding to know, without having either read or seen the play, why they would sink so low as to bring "this kind of filth" into the community. Despite his longstanding history of support for the liberal agenda of the theatre, he was unmoved by their explanations about the play's pedigree, its inherent plea for tolerance, or its metaphorical associations with other vital social issues. He likened it to child pornography and threatened to withdraw his financial support from the theatre. (Ultimately, he did not withdraw that support, but he never could bring himself to see the production.) Clearly, attitudes about bestiality and the social taboos associated with it, run

deep within contemporary American culture.[26] Perhaps because the taboo is so profound, there is also considerable fascination with the taboo. "Sexual relationships between humans and lower animals have long occupied the minds of men and women. . . . [M]ost compendiums of myths abound in tales of gods and goddesses taking non-human forms to fornicate with desired mortals. William Butler Yeats retold the rape of a great beauty by Zeus with visceral eloquence in 'Leda and the Swan,' and James Dickey wrote spellbindingly of a sheep/child preserved in a laboratory jar. There are also tales of women and animals. The legend of Catherine the Great and her stallion is apocryphal, but the Danish writer Peter Hoeg convincingly and rather lyrically told of a passionate affair in 'The Woman and the Ape'" (Johnson, Hartford Courant review of *The Goat*). A Google search for the word "bestiality" yields 1,670,000 references, an astonishing number of which are pornographic websites, offering stories, photographs, and films of the most graphic nature, catering to what is apparently a huge and profitable market.

Clearly, by presenting a protagonist who claims not only to have had an ongoing sexual relationship with a goat, but also to have fallen in love with her, Albee is quite consciously urging his spectators to enter a zone of discomfort. And he gives voice to the disgust and condemnation that he no doubt expects in his audience in each of the other three characters in the play. When Martin finally reveals the identity of his mysterious lover to his best friend by showing

[26] The taboo is by no means peculiarly American. The most serious criminal penalty for bestiality I could find was in the United Kingdom, where punishment may extend to life imprisonment.

him a photograph, Ross responds with righteous outrage: "You're in very serious trouble . . . THIS IS A GOAT! YOU'RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU'RE FUCKING A GOAT!" (punctuation in original 22-23). Martin's son Billy is confused and incredulous and becomes involved in a shouting match with his father that results in him contemptuously referring to him as a "goat-fucker," only to have Martin reply by calling him a "fucking faggot" (23). Martin immediately regrets this shocking and hateful epithet delivered to his own son, and even his wife, Stevie, who is struggling with her own pained reaction to Martin's conduct, comes to his defense:

> I said your father's sorry for calling you a fucking faggot because he's not that kind of man. He's a decent, liberal, right-thinking, talented, famous, gentle man *(Hard)* who right now would appear to be fucking a goat; and *I* would like to talk about *that, if* you don't mind (24).

But despite Stevie's apparent reasonableness and sense of humor, she can scarcely contain her outrage, which is continually expressed in this scene, both by her words and her actions (she destroys pottery and overturns furniture at regular intervals during her confrontation with her husband). As the scene draws to its climax, Stevie finally articulates the depth of her reaction:

> STEVIE. *(A huge animal sound: rage; sweeps the bookcase of whatever is on it, or overturns a piece of furniture. Silence:*

then starting quietly, building.) Now, you listen to me. I have listened to you. I have heard you tell me how much you love me, how you've never even wanted another woman, how we have been a more perfect marriage than chance would even *allow.* We're both too bright for *most* of the shit. We see the deep and awful humor of things go over the heads of most people; we see what's hideously wrong in what most people accept as normal; we have both the joys and the sorrows of all that. We have a straight line through life, right all the way to dying, but that's OK because it's a good line … so long as we don't screw up.

MARTIN. I know; I know.

STEVIE. *(Don't interrupt me!)* Shut up; so long as we don't screw up. *(Points at him.)* And *you've* screwed *up!*

MARTIN. Stevie, I …

STEVIE. I said, shut up. Do you know *how* you've done it? How you've screwed up?

MARTIN. *(Mumbled.)* Because I was at the vegetable stand one day, and I looked over to my right and I saw …

STEVIE. *(Hard and slow.)* Because you've broken something and it can't be fixed!

MARTIN. Stevie …

STEVIE. Fall out of love with me? Fine! No, not fine but that can be fixed … time … whatever! But tell me you love me and an animal – both of us! – equally? The same way? That you go from my bed – *our* bed … *(Aside-ish.)* it's amazing, you know, how good we are, still, how we please each other *and* ourselves so … fully, so … fresh each time … *(Aside over.)* … you go from our bed, wash your dick, get in your car and go to her, and do with her what I cannot imagine myself imagining? Or – worse! … that you've come *from* her, to *my* bed!? … and do with me what I *can* imagine … love …*want* you for!?

MARTIN. *Deep sadness.)* Oh, Stevie …

STEVIE. *(Not listening.)* That you can do these two things … and not understand how it … SHATTERS THE GLASS!!?? How it cannot be dealt with – how stop and forgiveness have nothing to do with it? And how *I* am destroyed? How *you* are? How I cannot admit it though I *know* it!? How I can not deny it because I cannot *admit* it!? Cannot admit it because it is outside of denying!?

MARTIN. Stevie, I … I promise you, I'll stop; I'll …

STEVIE. How stopping has nothing to do with having started!? How nothing has anything to do with anything!? *(Tears – if there –*

> *stop.)* You have brought me down, you goat-fucker; you love of my life! You have brought me down to *nothing! (Accusatory finger right at him.)* You have brought me down, and, Christ!, I'll bring you down with me! (43-44).

This climactic segment of Scene 2 not only expresses the depth and extent of Stevie's outrage, it gestures toward the layered complexity of Albee's design. On one hand, it provides an example of one of the ways in which the audience is invited to sympathize with Martin's predicament. Here, as in most of this scene, he is squarely on the defensive. Despite Stevie's demand for information and explanation, for most of the scene, as in this fragment, Martin struggles to penetrate the daunting barrier of Stevie's volcanic emotion. He simply can't get a word in edgewise for much of the scene. We know him to be a good and gentle man. Indeed, Stevie has described him in precisely those terms. His inability to communicate the full extent of his love for her and his own principled confusion at a time of overwhelming crisis invites our empathy. Who cannot identify with someone swept away by forces that he has unleashed but cannot control? Charles Isherwood, in his perceptive review in *Variety* of the New York production, comments on this:

> 'You've broken something and it can't be fixed,' she [Stevie] says bitterly, but it's hard not to notice that she's the one smashing crockery and upending the furniture. And the quiet sincerity of Martin, who recognizes the absurdity of his

> situation but also insists on its gravity, soon begins to work strangely on our sympathy. The cruelty in Stevie's shrill attacks is in stark opposition to Martin's wounded pleas ('Don't mock me') and tender descriptions of his 'epiphany' with Sylvia. Albee has described the play as 'testing the tolerance of the audience' -- another way of saying that it tests the audience's empathy.

I describe Martin's confusion as principled, because even as he perceives the evident damage that his conduct has inflicted upon his family, he cannot deny what he has experienced: a profound intercourse with another creature that he describes variously as an epiphany - and a love so pure and innocent as to be both beyond understanding and his capacity to effect it. He cannot explain the phenomenon that has engulfed his life, but he is unwilling to deny its power. There is both dignity and integrity in Martin's stubborn refusal to disavow his own experience, even in the face of its terrifying destructive power.

Stevie's pain, and our empathetic appreciation of it, helps to redeem her from the apparent cruelty she manifests in her relentless attack on Martin. This is a double tragedy, in which Stevie's life as well as that of Martin, is destroyed.

The scene excerpt quoted above also evokes several of Albee's major thematic preoccupations. One of these is the vexed and complex relationship between love and sex. Stevie conflates the two in one speech, describing Martin's professed love for both Sylvia and herself in the context of sexually

intimate moments. Later in the play, Billy pronounces his own inability even to complete his thoughts on this topic: “I get confused . . . sex and love; loving and . . .” (51). Love abounds in *The Goat.* Ben Brantley, in his *New York Times* review of the play observes that *The Goat* is “about a profoundly unsettling subject, which for the record is not bestiality but the irrational, confounding and convention-thwarting nature of love.”

The love of Martin and Stevie is articulated and rearticulated, but it is insufficient to prevent their mutual destruction. The love between Martin and his son Billy is also demonstrated clearly, but it doesn’t prevent the exchange of hateful and damaging epithets and accusations. Moreover, it is complicated by a whiff of truly forbidden sexuality, an incestuous homoerotic aspect to their relationship, which truly rocks an unsuspecting audience in Scene 3. Albee makes the argument in this play that sexuality, or at least the socially permissible expression of sexuality is bound by a bewildering complex of rules and constraints, but love is, virtually by definition, a mysterious and ultimately ineffable force in our lives that cannot be externally constrained. The inevitable rupture between love and sexuality, according to Albee here, is one source of tragic consequences.

Another theme resonating in the quoted segment has to do with the precariousness of our lives, a theme that reverberates in both tragic and absurdist contexts. Stevie observes that hers and Martin’s life is good, replete with all the joys and sorrows that a life well lived by bright, perceptive people can

generate: "We have a straight line through life, right all the way to dying, but that's OK because it's a good line … so long as we don't screw up." In Stevie's view, the equilibrium of their lives has been disrupted by Martin's screw-up, his willful violation of fundamental rules. Martin sees it differently as the result of something that is beyond both understanding and will:

> Don't you see the . . . don't you see the 'thing' that happened to me? What nobody understands? Why I can't feel what I'm supposed to!? Because it relates to nothing? It can't have happened! It did but it *can't* have! (39-40).

For both of them, a model life of personal and professional achievement, a warm and fully functional family unit, and a profound sense of well-being have all been shattered in one revelatory instant. In Aristotelian terms, a discovery has engendered a tragic reversal.

In discussing Martin's sexual involvement with Sylvia the goat, Stevie makes reference to him doing with her "what I cannot imagine myself imagining" And even Martin, in his faltering attempt to describe his experience with Sylvia the goat, speaks of that experience as "an ecstasy and a purity, and a … love of a … un-i-mag-in-able kind" (punctuation in original, 39). I suggest though that Martin's power of imagination (he is carefully described as a world-class architect – a designation that certainly implies a superior imagination) is precisely what renders him open to the profound experience he has after encountering Sylvia. He is able to transcend the boundaries of the ordinary and the quotidian by virtue

of his imaginary leap that takes him from an amusingly pastoral encounter with a barnyard animal to a sense of union, and ultimately sexual congress, with the "soul" that he perceives on looking into Sylvia's eyes.

Imagination is, of course, the engine of empathy, the vessel by which we travel across psychic space and experience (or at least intimately perceive) the worlds of others. Edward Albee, in turn, relies upon the imagination of the audience, not only to participate in Martin's emotional journey, but also to engage his use of metaphor. For while Martin has quite literally taken up with a goat, it seems clear that Albee simultaneously intends, by his use of the goat as a pivotal subject in the play, to conjure up other associations and topics.

We must note, at the outset, that Sylvia is not a cow, a sheep, a pig, or any other animal that might have engaged Martin's attention, but a goat. Albee's choice here is bound up both in his interest in exploring the nature of tragedy and in his preoccupation with the conflicts between sexual behavior and social constraint. The Oxford English Dictionary confirms that the etymology of word "tragedy" is derived from the Greek for "goat-song." Goats were closely identified with the ecstatic cult of Dionysus, among whose mythic followers were satyrs, creatures combining features of men and goats and remarkable mostly for their sexual appetites and capacities. The Greeks associated Dionysus not only with regeneration, sensuality, and wine, but also with bodily fluids, including both blood and semen. The great Greek tragedies, of course, were written to compete for honors at the Athenian festival that honored Dionysus, and among

the ritual practices associated with that festival was the sacrifice of a goat. For a work that seeks to explore and define the essence of tragedy, these historical associations are irresistible.

But if the goat gestures toward the Dionysian in historical terms, the Dionysian is also integrally related to Albee's consideration of sexual transgression. It is possible to read Albee's use of the goat as the object of Martin's affections metaphorically, as a stand-in for other sexual behaviors that depart from normative mainstreams, especially homosexuality. (Albee's decision to use a predominantly masculine name, "Stevie," for Martin's specifically female wife also contributes to a sense of sexual ambiguity.)

Albee is an out gay man, and while his work has rarely focused specifically on gay sexuality, critics have often noted homoerotic motifs in his work. Here, where Albee has described himself as writing a play that explores the limits of tolerance, Martin's tolerance for his own son's homosexuality is probed quite explicitly, when he lashes out at his son as a "fucking faggot" even as he seeks tolerance and understanding for his own zoophiliac sexual experiences. More importantly, Albee has chosen to name the son Billy, an obvious reference to goats, and to have Billy engage his father in scene three in an overtly sexual manner. When Martin seeks to reassure his son as to the relative meaninglessness of sexual impulses, he tells him a story about a time when his "friend" had his *kid* on his lap, a kid not old enough to be a boy or a girl yet, whose squirming caused his friend to become erect (51). As it becomes

clear that Martin is referring to himself, and that the *kid* in question is likely his son, Billy, we are left wondering whether this is a play about an affair with a goat or an oblique treatment of homosexual incest. I believe that Albee is quite sincere in his literal descriptions of Martin with the goat, but it also seems clear that he has seized an opportunity to add breadth and depth to his essential proposition by allowing for some metaphoric resonance relating to that goat.

Albee investigated the metaphoric resonance of the heterosexual married couple as far back as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* There, George and Martha's troubled marriage, ruptured by deep antagonisms and sustained by elaborate illusions, served as a compelling symbolic reference to the tensions seething below the surfaces of American institutions and American complacency in that particular slice of time (the early 1960's). In *The Goat*, Martin's and Stevie's marriage stand once again for a broader idea – the rules and conventions of orderly society. Theirs is portrayed as a model marriage, complete with ongoing intellectual and sexual compatibility, until Martin flaunts the rules by reaching sexually beyond his species, invoking Stevie's wrath, the unambiguous condemnation of Ross, and the utter destruction of everyone living within the orbit of the rules that have been violated.

And as in *Virginia Woolf*, *The Goat* makes extensive use of games and game-playing as a metaphor for the prevalence of social rules and predictable patterns, and the competitive character of people who seek to bend the rules to their own purposes. While George and Martha play darkly mischievous games

(like Get the Guests and Hump the Hostess) that have profound emotional consequences, both for themselves and for their guests, the word games favored by Martin and Stevie seem more designed to underscore the limitations of language when engaging cosmic forces and unknowable mysteries. At the most pitched moments of their argument, either Stevie or Martin will parenthetically acknowledge an especially good or an especially unfortunate turn of phrase. They are always in competition, seeking to best the other in wit or cleverness, even as they seek to express emotional extremes that would seem to render wit superfluous. The slippery inadequacy of language is a favorite Albee theme. "Indeed, the common thread that runs through many of his seemingly diverse plays is his characters' oft-stated concern with language and, in particular, the failures and limitations of the linguistic medium. For Albee, language is the medium or meeting ground which exists between the interior and exterior worlds of the speaker and the listener" (Wasserman 29). Here the theme is advanced with crystal clarity: After Martin calls attention to Stevie's emotionally fraught and imprecise use of language, she replies, "women in deep woe often mix their metaphors" (38). This is on one hand a direct acknowledgment of the prominence of metaphors in the play, and on the other hand a nuanced argument that in the realm of the tragic, where lives are precariously balanced on the edge of catastrophe, there is a primacy of experience that resists comparison, i.e., that is inimical to metaphor.

In my production at least, Stevie's line about deep woe and metaphor invariably provoked uneasy laughter. Albee's use of humor, especially in the midst of circumstances that seem anything but funny, is a consistent feature in the body of his work. That is especially true in *The Goat*. It is reasonable to inquire what the place of humor is in a work that purports to define tragedy. Our models for tragic writing, the extant works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, are notably devoid of humor. While the tragic competitions at the Festival of Dionysus required the submission of three tragic works and a satyr play, which was a vehicle for broad and bawdy humor, to the best of our knowledge, the forms were strictly segregated. While the Athenians apparently recognized a value in comic relief, the use of humor was relegated to a separate work, one that presumably would not detract from the weight and seriousness of the tragic trilogy that preceded it. Albee, however, is exploring tragedy in the context of our contemporary world, a post-Beckett world in which the boundaries between genres are blurred and hybrid forms predominate. But Albee is not simply offering a tragicomedy. He is determined to bring his audience to a place of profound emotional response, and he employs humor as a tactical device in that effort.

Unexpected humor and sometimes inappropriate humor in this play serves to keep the audience off-balance, unable to comfortably predict the direction of the events unfolding before it. We laugh, to be sure, but in the words of Charles Isherwood, "before long that laughter begins to stick in the throat, and by the end

of the latest and possibly most provocative play from the chronically provocative Edward Albee, it has been replaced by something closer to anguish: for a family in tatters, and for the lack of compassion that is at the root of human destructiveness and, one senses uneasily, at the root of so much laughter" (2002).

The Goat in Production

While *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* was given the Antoinette Perry Award (more popularly known as the Tony) for best play, the critical reaction to the New York production was decidedly mixed. Of twenty-one reviews I read, seven were clearly positive, six were clearly negative, and eight were somewhat ambiguous, finding merit in some aspects of the play and the production, while expressing serious reservations about others. Barbara Phillips, in *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, dismissed the play as a "very minor Albee effort." Elysa Gardner, writing for *USA Today*, describes it as a "self-indulgent mess, in which the cynical, disdainful view of family life that has informed some of Albee's more eloquent works reaches its nauseating nadir." Howard Kissel, of the *New York Daily News*, while acknowledging Albee's aspirations toward the tragic, opines that "[t]he sad truth is that the genre *The Goat* better exemplifies is boulevard comedy, and even here it fails. For comedy to work on more than a gag level, you have to believe in the characters. From the second it begins, almost everything about *The Goat* rings false." Michael Kuchwara, on the other hand,

writing for the *Associated Press*, describes it as a "play that is as startling as it is satisfying. In fact, it is one of the most satisfying productions of the Broadway season . . . Although it is often quite funny, *The Goat*, which opened Sunday at the Golden Theatre, is a serious, thoughtful, even tragic play despite the comic outrageousness of its premise." Martin Denton, reviewing the play for NYTheatre.com, writes that it is a "provocative, funny, troubling play . . . that demands to be seen, and read, and heard."

Clearly, a number of critics had considerable difficulty grappling with the theme of bestiality (apparently either literally or metaphorically), characterizing it as straining credulity or being too disgusting a topic to invite serious consideration. While Edward Albee no longer responds to specific critical remarks, his words in reaction to an attack on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, written four decades ago, seems an appropriate retort:

> Well, if the theater must bring us only what we can immediately apprehend or comfortably relate to, let us stop going to the theater entirely; . . . Further: If the theater must only, as Mr. Hates puts it, 'reflect or express the fundamental beliefs, feelings, convictions, aspirations' of our audiences, then say I, down with all debate; down with all playwrights who have questioned the underpinnings of all the fundamental beliefs; . . . down, then, say I, with Moliere, Ibsen, Shaw, Aristophanes. Down with the theater as an

> educational as well as an entertainment medium. Down with the theater as a force for social and political advancement. Down with the theater! (Amacher 23)

Albee has consistently, throughout his career, understood part of his function as a public intellectual to be provocation. He has championed the place of the theatre in the larger context of great debates about ideas. And he has always seen himself as part of a continuum of writers for the theatre that have shared this commitment. Perhaps Michael Feingold, of *The Village Voice*, had this in mind when he wrote in his review of *The Goat:*

> One of the easiest plays in decades to burlesque and ridicule, Edward Albee's *The Goat* is also the one most likely to be talked about seriously—angrily, ferociously—for years to come. You can hear the controversy rising around you as you exit up the aisle, and it does not abate on the way home. For a moment, the theater has become the principal source of New York conversation again . . . Yes, Mr. Albee knows the art of giving moral debate an aesthetic shape. If it's too early to list *The Goat* among his masterpieces, still, those who are scrambling to inscribe it on the scroll of his disasters had better move slowly: They may yet find themselves off in the hall of shame, with the guys who suppressed *Ghosts* and hooted down *The Rite of Spring*.

For me, the enduring value of this play seemed clear, and I was especially concerned that my own production make clear that value to the audiences I would be addressing. I was convinced that a production of this play was a pathway to a certain variety of theatrical wonder, that variety of wonder associated with the tragic – and with the pity and fear that Aristotle had described several millennia ago.

My experience in preparing and evaluating this production was framed by two events: During the time that I was in rehearsal, I was teaching a course in play analysis at Cornell College (where I teach in the Theatre Department). As part of that course, my class of twenty-five students undertook an intensive engagement with the text of *The Goat*, an engagement that included, for some of them, dramaturgical research projects relating to the play. The class was able to attend a performance of the play after it opened. Second, during the run of the play at Riverside Theatre, I resided over a lively talk-back with members of the audience and my cast. Both my experience with my class and my experience in dialogue with a general audience proved to be especially useful in thinking about this play and this production.

I had discussed the essential premises of the play with my class before they read it, so I was not surprised that, for many, the shock value of Martin's sexual involvement with a goat was substantially diminished, though some students confessed to being "creeped out" by the idea. I was somewhat surprised during the initial discussion of the play to find that for a substantial

minority of the students, Billy's and Martin's kiss, and especially Martin's story about a man being arouses by a baby in his lap, were considerably more disturbing than inter-species sexuality. When one student objected to these incidents in the third scene as being gratuitous and unnecessary, another student argued passionately that they represented an essential part of Albee's design, that, in fact, the play built specifically to these moments in order to challenge our assumed values where they really counted: with respect not only to bestiality, but to the same sex relationships that the bestiality stood for metaphorically, and beyond those to the taboos involving incest and pedophilia. His point was not that Albee was advocating on behalf of these practices, but that he wanted to use them to shake our complacency, just when we had become somewhat desensitized to the bizarre passion of Martin for Sylvia. The class debated these points for hours, and I think Albee would have been pleased.

I learned during class discussions that, on the basis of reading the script, the overwhelming majority of students felt considerable empathy for Martin. While virtually none of them would acknowledge a capacity to identify with his sexual passion for an animal, they were entirely prepared to accept that he was an essentially good man being torn apart by forces, in this case the destructive dimension of love, that were quite beyond his control. I was struck by their almost universal antipathy for Stevie. They resented her unwillingness to listen to Martin, even after she had demanded that he account for his actions. Very few students seemed able or willing to place themselves in her shoes. They

tended to be dismissive of Ross, writing him off as a villain who represented the most repressive and judgmental aspects of social convention. And few students seemed to engage Billy as anything except a device to plead for tolerance with regard to homosexuality. They approved that message, but they did not engage this character in more human and personal terms.

I emerged from these class discussions with a conviction that, if this production was to have the tragic power I imagined, it would be necessary for the audience to identify with some of the other characters as well as Martin. Only then I believed would the total devastation of this fictional family have the kind of impact that truly penetrated the detached composure of an audience at a theatrical event.[27] My rehearsal strategy was directly conditioned by my students' responses.

An unusual aspect of producing an Albee play is that the producing entity must seek Albee's approval of the actors and director undertaking the production, before that production can be licensed. We had assembled our cast for this production, therefore, at a much earlier point than was usually the case. I cast

[27] I also took from this class some very valuable insights about zoophilia, and the extent to which Martin's behavior either conformed to or deviated from the experience of zoophiliacs who had been studied by psychologists. Two of my students, Diana Ingersoll-Cope and Matt Heindel, chose to write research papers on this topic in fulfillment of an assignment in dramaturgical research. They both discovered that the phenomenon of zoophilia (a term preferred in the literature to "bestiality") was more widespread than we had assumed. They found that many of Martin's descriptions of his emotional reactions to Sylvia and his behavior were quite consistent with case studies in the literature. There was one vital exception: Most reported and studied cases of men involved in the practice of zoophilia were otherwise fairly dysfunctional in terms of their sexual relations with humans. Martin is depicted as having a satisfying sex life with his wife. (Interestingly, many women involved in sexual behavior with animals retained sexual functionality with their human partners.) They discovered a substantial community of zoophiliacs who argue for acceptance of their "lifestyle," likening their struggle for acceptance to various civil rights movements. They both detailed considerable controversy relating to whether or not animals can be understood to consent to a sexual relationship with a human, an issue taken up in the play by Stevie. (Ingersoll-Cope and Heindel).

David Combs, a wonderful character actor from Los Angeles as Martin. I had thought of Jody Hovland, one of the co-artistic directors of Riverside Theatre and my good friend, as Stevie from the time I had become aware of the play. Her partner (and the other artistic director of the company), Ron Clark, was tapped to play Ross, and I chose Jackson Doran, a gifted young actor from Iowa City, to play the role of Billy. We did not anticipate and did not receive resistance from the author to this casting.

I had chosen these actors not only because I believed each of them was well qualified to perform his or her assigned role, but because I had worked with each of them many times before, and they had each worked with each other. We had a relatively short rehearsal period for both economic and scheduling reasons, and I wanted to be sure that our time would be used efficiently. I believed that given our experience in working together, we would begin with a level of trust and comfort the attainment of which would otherwise consume valuable time. As the emotional terrain we traversed during rehearsal became more and more treacherous and sensitive, I had more than one occasion to be grateful for that threshold decision.

Taking the insight gleaned from my experience with my Cornell class, I was determined to find a way to make each of these characters empathetic in some way. Ross was immediately the most problematic. He betrays the confidence of his close friend and stands in judgment of him. He is not a sympathetic character. And yet he is identified as Martin's closest friend. We

determined to explore the reasons and indicia of that friendship in rehearsal, focusing on the early part of the first scene between these two men, before the revelation of Martin's involvement with Sylvia the goat. I worked with David and Ron to achieve a level of easy intimacy and playfulness between these two men that would account for Martin's affection for Ross. We eventually developed a rich subtext of camaraderie and a series of warm physical interactions between these two characters that provided a compelling rationale for their friendship. I'm not sure that we ultimately made of Ross a character with whom many audience members would choose to identify, but, at the very least, we established a foundational friendship which allowed Ross's betrayal of Martin's confidence to seem especially painful and imbued with a sense of genuine loss.

Jackson Doran, an unusually experienced and accomplished actor for his twenty-two years, created a convincing seventeen year old Billy. He was able to develop a slouching, somewhat awkward physical presence, and an uneven post-pubescent vocal quality that bestowed instant credibility on the confused adolescent character he was portraying. We decided immediately not to graft onto this character any physical or behavioral attributes that could be read as gay. Billy's sexuality was a given in the text. We wanted to be very careful to avoid any characterization that smacked of stereotype. Jackson brought to the table a wonderful emotional availability in addition to his technical skill, and he made Billy's pain and bewilderment so excruciatingly raw, his pain so manifest, that the critical moment when Billy impulsively kisses his father in a sexual way

could be seen as an occasion calling for comfort rather than censure. Martin's attempts to console him, even with the potentially off-putting story of a man's arousal at a baby in his lap, became the natural response of a loving father to a son in distress, rather than a provocation directed to the audience.

Stevie was a more difficult case. Albee has a line early in the play in which Ross hears a sound that Martin jokingly identifies as the sound made by the Eumenidies (the vengeful furies of Greek myth) in a bit of clever foreshadowing. But Stevie's behavior is not unlike a fury. While depicted in the first scene as a warm, sophisticated, and fun-loving partner to Martin, in scene two she is outraged, aggressive, and accusatory. Her assault on Martin throughout this scene is unrelenting, and while intermittently humorous, builds to a terrifying climax of rage that ultimately results in Sylvia's slaughter. Yet if the play is to fulfill its tragic potential, we must feel the loss suffered by the entire family, not just Martin. To some extent, the audience is allowed the opportunity to empathize with Stevie's pain and outrage. We can identify with her inability to understand a goat as a rival. When Martin asserts his love for Stevie despite his professed love for the goat, she replies, "How can you love me when you love so much less?" (25). Her attacks, however, on Martin are so ferocious at times that their intensity threatens to overwhelm our capacity to understand her behavior.

Albee provides an important opportunity to confront this problem midway through the second scene. Stevie has a rambling speech in which she describes her relationship with her late mother and her mother's advice about marriage.

This speech then moves to an affirmation by Stevie of the extent of her love for Martin and the happiness she had experienced in their marriage. The speech is designed to reveal Stevie's more fragile side, though her moment of vulnerability is superseded by an episode of destructive rage when Martin attempts to comfort her. We chose in rehearsal to explore and expand this moment of Stevie's vulnerability with the express intention of inviting more audience sympathy for her. Jody worked over the course of rehearsals to find the appropriate level of exposure for Stevie in this delicate moment, the right amount of pathos. It turned out to be heartbreaking, and as her voice cracked and her face glistened with tears, I found myself responding emotionally to her pain even as I recoiled at the ferocity of her anger moments later. I came to understand this as a pivotal moment in the play, the last and lost opportunity for understanding and compassion to trump the destructive power of rage and vengeance.

Martin is the focal point of the play. He is never off stage. It is, of course, his conduct which is the catalyst for the essential arguments of the play, and it is his behavior that tests our capacity for tolerance. Albee has written Martin as a good and decent man, devoted to his wife and son, possessed of extraordinary imagination and creativity that has translated into recognized and celebrated achievement within his field, who nonetheless is gripped by passions that he can neither understand nor control. As the reactions of my class demonstrated, Martin is a character who, on the page, invites some measure of empathy. My concern in rehearsal was to insure that this probable audience reaction was

maintained, and, if possible, deepened on the stage.

David Combs is an accomplished actor, who has made for himself a career largely in television and in commercials. The stage remains his first love, however, and he is always eager to find opportunities for the far less lucrative work that theatre represents. I had worked with him on a number of occasions, primarily in the context of the Riverside Shakespeare Festival, where among other roles, he had played Malvolio for me in *Twelfth Night* and Jacques in *As You Like It*. Comedic character roles are something of a specialty for him, and he was enthusiastic about exploring the much darker realm conjured in *The Goat*. Throughout the early part of rehearsal, David was somewhat tentative, exploring different choices at different moments in the play, without truly taking stock of the depths of despair to which Martin sinks. In these early rehearsals, David managed to find a simplicity and earnestness that made Martin's relationship with Sylvia somehow plausible, but the devastation that Martin suffers remained an abstraction despite our frequent conversations about it.

David was with us as a guest artist, living in temporary quarters, separated from his wife and friends. While everyone else associated with the production had responsibilities and a life outside rehearsal, for David, virtually all his time outside of rehearsal was spent thinking about and studying the script. The intensity of his focus paid off handsomely about halfway through the rehearsal process. He called me at home late one night, hours after rehearsal had ended to inform me that he finally understood the ending of the play, by which he meant

the utter hopeless destruction that Martin experienced. He attempted to joke about it, calling me a variety of cheerfully obscene names for having put him through this, but despite his humor, he was clearly shaken.

The following day in rehearsal we returned to the third and final scene of the play, and for the first time, David processed as an actor the extent of Martin's fall, a processing that manifested itself in his gradual physical diminution, his uncertain gentleness with Billy, his plaintive sense of searching for a means to make himself understood, and finally, on Stevie's entrance with Sylvia's carcass, his total emotional collapse. David, not Martin, sobbed convulsively for a period after I had called the final blackout and was cradled by Jody for a long time, now his fellow actor again, who moments before had been the instrument of his misery. From that point on, David never failed to courageously enter this state of emotional extremity, taking his fellow actors with him, and the ending of the play took on a theatrical power that was simultaneously draining and exhilarating. I was eager, as was my cast, for the crucible of an audience.

The Production Received

We opened on January 23, 2004. The opening night audience was clearly stunned at the play's conclusion, and reaction was unequivocally enthusiastic. My first opportunity to receive more formally organized feedback came several days later, when my Play Analysis class attended a performance and stayed for

a conversation with me and the cast. I was especially curious to know whether the experience of seeing the play in performance had significantly altered any perceptions about it. For this audience, one that had read and extensively analyzed the playtext, the play would not, I thought, be especially shocking or provocative. We had, after all, discussed the issues raised by the play and dissected Albee's writerly tactics for days. Yet as I sat on stage and surveyed the faces of my students, they seemed as stunned and moved as had other audiences I had observed. The first few comments by my students confirmed that generally, despite their familiarity with the script and their intellectual engagement with it, they had been unprepared for the emotional impact of seeing it in performance. As they verbalized their response, it became clear that many of them had simply been overcome with an empathic reaction – to both Martin and Stevie. The immediacy of live performance, the experience of engaging these characters in embodied form, coupled with their preexisting intellectual analysis had catapulted many of them into a state that might be described as awe.

The reaction of my students seemed to provide evidence that tended to confirm an interactive theory of the theatre experience, where the full range of meaning resides in the ephemeral and embodied intersection of performer and spectator on the occasion of a theatrical exchange. This is consistent with Sauter's model of performance analysis in *The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception*. Sauter's model focuses on the theatre experience

as a communicative event that occurs in the actual encounter of performer and spectator (the mutuality of that encounter is a key part of his analysis) and upon the contexts in which the communication takes place. His characterization of the theatrical encounter as a communicative event considers it a place where meaning is sought. I contend that his model also helps to account for the stimulation of empathy as part of that "meaning."

Using a self-described phenomenological approach, Sauter divides theatrical communication into three dynamically interconnected aspects: the sensory aspect, the artistic aspect, and the symbolic aspect (82-88). I think Sauter's sensory aspect of performance is especially useful in theorizing some of the implications of embodied performance and the response of my students. On the sensory level of communication, spectators may have an empathic response simply by perceiving the physical movement and facial expressions of performers, something quite impossible in reading the script. A substantial body of psychological research has demonstrated the existence of a phenomenon called "emotional contagion," where people perceiving an emotionally significant facial expression or posture imitate it unconsciously, and in the process experience some form of the emotion which initiated the process in the first place (Hatfield et al). It is a useful reminder of both how immediate and how embodied is the exchange between performer and spectator. Levenson and Ruef, in exploring the physiological dimension of emotional knowledge underscore this post-Cartesian point of view: "Emotion is arguably the prototypical mind-body

phenomenon … If one experiences emotional rapport with another, there will be an element of physiological rapport as well" (45). In describing a series of instances of physiological synchrony that attend moments of emotional rapport, they cite facial mimicry as the subject of an especially large body of research, all of which suggest a nexus between facial mimicry and emotional rapport (or empathy):

> If one person is in the throes of an emotion and is displaying the facial expression appropriate to that emotion, another person might view that expression and either automatically (via processes of facial mimicry) or intentionally produce the same facial expression. The person who mimics the facial expression of another could then begin to experience the subjective experience of the associated emotion as well as having the associated physical responses activated. In terms of empathic accuracy, the receiver of an emotion transferred in this way would have access to additional clues to how the other person was feeling beyond those that derive from observing that person's behavior and considering the environmental context. Now, receivers could obtain supplemental information about the other person's emotions by considering their own emotional state (58-59).

In a theatrical context, this process might describe a level of sensory and nonverbal communication between actor and spectator that is far more profound in emotional terms than the mere cognitive processing of dialogue. Hodges and Wegner, in describing ways in which cognitive process may trigger automatic empathy, state that "thinking about the characteristics of a person may yield an automatic empathic response that increases the likelihood that one will behave as one believes that person would behave" (318).

As I observed my students watching the performance, I was struck by the extent to which many exhibited facial expressions that seemed to mirror expressions I had observed in watching David and Jody in rehearsal and performance. I specifically observed facial expressions that corresponded to moments of pain and surprise. The latter expression was the most interesting, because unlike Albee's characters who were theoretically receiving surprising information from time to time in the course of the scene, these students knew perfectly well what was coming. I cannot claim to have derived information using a scientific methodology, but the anecdotal evidence of my own observation suggested an active process of empathetic connection or contagion. This was true even at the climactic moment when Stevie entered with the bloody bag that was supposed to contain Sylvia's corpse. I observed faces accurately mirroring Martin's shock, despite their knowledge and expectation of this moment.

Sauter's second category of performer/spectator intersection, the artistic level, adds a dimension of intentionality or design to the relatively automatic responses described above. The actors, after all, are seeking specifically to affect the audience. Theatre artists routinely investigate the emotional and cognitive landscapes that transform the theoretical abstract into the theatrical particular. That, of course, was precisely the agenda I described in rehearsal, where the actors were seeking a level of personalized emotional connection with their characters. The skill of the performer (or the director or the playwright) in portraying others in fictionalized circumstances and the effort of the audience in receiving that portrayal establishes an empathic portal – an opportunity to empathize with an other that otherwise might never occur. Actors routinely therefore seek to perfect techniques of what the psychological literature refers to as controlled empathy in seeking identification with the characters they portray. In their discussion of controlled empathy, Hodges and Wegner write that

> [C]ontrolled empathy is as effortful as climbing up a mountainside . . . We can think of reaching a particular mountain peak as offering a certain vista, or perspective, just as reaching empathy offers us a certain person's perspective. In our attempts to reach the mountain peak, we search for grips, holds, and trails that will help us on our way (320).

This is not only descriptive of the actor's process in building character, it also describes a process of reception, where a spectator seizes upon key moments

involving dialogue or gesture or association to construct a means of achieving perspective on what is unfolding before her. My students seemed to respond, not to the text alone, or the virtuosity of individual performances, or to my directorial shaping and selection process. Each of these factors was important I believe in accounting for their emotional reaction to the performance, but, in speaking with them, it was the totality of the experience, the gestalt of it, that brought them to a different plateau of engagement.

As the run of the production continued, it became obvious that there was a "buzz" about it within the local theatre-going community. The production was talked about frequently, both for its perceived theatrical merits and in terms of its content. Resistance to the idea of a show often described as "about bestiality" could be discerned in empirical terms. Box office figures suggested that the show was doing adequately financially, but not nearly as well as we had hoped, given the seemingly positive reactions of those who actually saw it. Halfway through the run, an audience was invited to remain after a Friday night performance to engage me as the director and the cast in a dialogue. These talkback events are a regular feature of Riverside Theatre's main indoor season.

A typical talkback involves perhaps 40% of the audience and lasts for approximately 30 minutes. On this occasion, approximately 75% of the audience remained in the theatre for the event, and the discussion went on for well over an hour. It began somewhat awkwardly. I took the stage after the curtain call, announced our intention to have a very informal dialogue in which we would

respond to questions and comments, and invited audience members to speak out. I was met with complete silence and a small sea of faces that refused to focus on me. The audience had been transported by the experience of the play into a state of awed silence, a state of pity and fear, a state of dread, a state of tragic wonder.

I improvised a few remarks about Edward Albee's career and my understanding of his intentions in writing this play. After perhaps five minutes, a woman raised her hand, asked a question, and we were off and running, soon involved in a spirited discussion of the play and the players. At the conclusion of the event, one theatre-goer approached me to explain the initial reticence of the audience. "We were too shell-shocked at the end of the play to begin a discussion immediately," he explained. "In the future, you should allow some time for us to recover."

As is often the case, in my experience, on occasions like these, a certain proportion of the questions invariably dealt with the acting process. People wanted to know how the actors summoned such extreme emotion and what the aftermath was like, and so on. But there was also a great deal of conversation about the substantive content of the play. I was gratified to learn how many audience members, in response to my questions, professed an empathetic reaction to three of the four characters. While no one wanted to excuse Ross's betrayal of his friend, a surprising number of people expressed understanding of, and even identification with, Stevie's outrage, even as they confirmed their

empathy for Martin. One audience member who now professed a deep sense of empathy for Martin had attended the pre-opening discussion. There he had doubted his capacity to sympathize with anyone involved in bestiality. The experience of the play had overcome his personal revulsion at the subject matter.

As the conversation turned to the "message" of the play, opinion divided. A significant minority articulated an opinion that the tragic conclusion of the play served as a sort of warning about the consequences of truly transgressive conduct. A clear majority of the audience, however, seemed to embrace that interpretation of the play that involves a claim for the necessity of both tolerance and compassion. We actually had brief but substantive discussions about whether or not zoophilia should be identified as destructive behavior, about the unpredictable and sometimes unfathomable intersections between love and sex, and about the place of understanding in ordering social regulations. Significantly, many respondents saw Martin's bestiality in metaphoric terms, enabling a leap to a more general consideration of sexual behavior. Virtually all the spectators who spoke acknowledged both a profound emotional experience and an active intellectual engagement with the play. At the conclusion of the discussion, I was satisfied that at the least, we had offered a production that was truly provocative, one that stimulated serious conversation and a desire to understand phenomena outside the experience of most spectators.

For more than a month after the production closed, people who had seen it and who knew of my association with it would stop me to discuss it. I have

never been associated with a production that occasioned more searching conversations long after the event. Elin Diamond writes, in seeking to reconcile aspects of Brechtian theory with the concept of postmodern difference:

> But Brechtian theory leaves room for at least one feature of *écriture* – the notion that meaning is beyond capture within the covers of the play or the hours of the performance. This is not to deny Brecht's wish for an instructive, analytical theater; on the contrary, it invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility – for Brecht a crucial possibility – that signification (the production of meaning) continue beyond the play's end, even as it congeals into action and choice after the spectator leaves the theater (1997: 49).

I do not claim that the emotional or intellectual understanding achieved during the course of some spectators' reception of *The Goat* resulted in concrete action. But to the extent that people continued to think about the experience and continued to produce ideas about its meaning after the event, an empathetic theatrical engagement by the audience has served a Brechtian goal of a theatre that compels social analysis instead of frustrating it. The experience of the tragic has led not to a reinforcement of a social status quo, but to its interrogation. Charles Isherwood has written:

> [T]he playwright is seeking in *The Goat* to affirm that tragedy . . . has a place in contemporary culture and can

> still move us with its primal power. With daily newspapers filled with stories that turn the most shocking circumstances into banalities, we can still be shaken, be awed, be filled with 'pity and terror' by the dilemma of a human being confronting the extraordinary in life. Albee is trying to shock us into an awareness that yes, the deeper mysteries of life are still abroad in the world; more importantly, they still cry out for compassion – the nobler form of pity (2003, 105).

The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? invites empathy with characters whose conduct is considered outside acceptable boundaries. It does so while inviting its audience to make metaphoric associations that expand that conduct into areas closer to the experience of its audience. It demands a kind of personal reckoning that is freighted with both emotional and intellectual elements. And it performs these functions by demanding that the audience respond to its own embodied experience phenomenologically, in the uncompromising and immediate context of live performance. On this occasion at least, the play offered more than a definition of tragedy; it offered a passport to a particular province of theatrical wonder, where delight is displaced by dread and the awful acknowledgment of human frailty.

A Postscript:

Thinking Back and Looking Forward

This project has been, in large part, an attempt to describe and theorize a phenomenon of reception in specific theatrical circumstances. I have argued for my status as a model spectator, an audience member uniquely attuned, at least in my own directorial work, to the impossibly complex combination of conceived intention and evanescent embodied experience that is theatrical reception, and I have seized upon a variety of intuited assumptions about the responses of other hypothetical spectators. I have reported my observations of other, less personally implicated, audience members in the productions I have discussed wherever possible, as I have reported the anecdotal evidence of the articulated responses of individual audience members on various occasions. I make no claim of undertaking more scientific efforts to measure and report upon audience reactions to the productions I have examined. I cannot accurately predict whether, in the final analysis, my autoethnographic accounts of viewing and directing experiences muster sufficient probative force to convince the reader of my claims about theatrical wonder. I do, however, make the following claim: My research has convinced me that my initial conception and description of theatrical wonder as a phenomenological event occasioned by the effort to understand novel metaphor in circumstances colored by the empathetic association with

others is a theoretically viable and useful way to engage aspects of theatrical performance. Moreover, that research has had profound impact on me as a practicing artist. Some of the insights gleaned from my investigation loom large in my preparations for future projects.

My earliest conception of theatrical wonder as an emotionally full expression of delight in theatrical artistry, the legacy of Tinkerbell, has ripened into a complicated consideration of embodied metaphor, critically inflected notions of intersubjectivity, and utopian performatives. Theatrical wonder is now implicated, for me, in the processes by which I perceive in the theatre that which is possible in the larger world and acknowledge the emotional impact of that perception. Theatrical wonder has expanded to embrace the awe of tragic imagination along with the delight of the innovative imagination that bodies forth unexpected associations. Theatrical wonder has become not only a theoretical lens that provides a means of engaging a theatrical past, but also a quest.

From my consideration of Theatre de Complicite (and the training that enables its work), I have taken a keen appreciation of the fruits of virtuosity and elevated artistry, but I have also taken an understanding of the special power of metaphor when it is literally embodied by the performer and intersubjectively experienced by the spectator. I have absorbed a lesson about the way that a milieu of playfulness and a strategy of collusion with the spectator enhance the opportunities for theatrical events that seek to engender wonder.

From my experience in directing *Harry's Way*, I have learned that a metaphor which becomes too familiar, and which is perceived in a theatrical circumstance that valorizes intellectual distance and diminishes empathetic opportunities, loses its agency with regard to a capacity to inspire wonder. A strategy designed to facilitate the engagement of ideas succeeded, but an implicit cost of that strategy was the elimination of the possibility of fusing intellect and emotion in the unusually productive way that I have associated with wonder.

My production of *Romeo and Juliet* provided an opportunity to explore the impulse toward compassion in a particularly contentious context. I am not at all convinced that the production elicited an experience of wonder, in all the complexity that I have sought to describe for that phenomenon, but I believe that the conscious attempt to explore the operation of theatrical empathy gestured toward a utopian conception of foregrounding the human cost of hatred in productive ways. It was also a useful exercise in the theatrical practice of cultural ethnography, an attempt to find a principled and responsible way to encounter and theatrically represent a cultural Other.

Working on *The Goat* provided an opportunity to explore the breadth of wonder, to understand that the apprehension of the tragic has a vitality in a progressive context, by virtue of its simultaneous appeal to imagination and feeling, which goes beyond the socially conservative phenomenon of catharsis, where the venting of emotion serves to reaffirm social equilibrium. When tragic reaction is flecked with wonder, it carries with it an elusive glimpse of an

alternative world, a world, in this case, when perhaps sexual behavior that moves beyond the boundaries of social acceptability might invite compassion and tolerance instead of reflexive condemnation and the devastation that judgment without compassion can yield.

We live in fractured, contentious, and fearful times. Taking note of that uneasy air of national insecurity and suspicion, Ben Cameron notes that

> [t]he theatre invites us to see our fellow human beings with generosity and curiosity. To commit to the theatre in these times is to commit to conversation. To commit to the value of hearing each other. To commit to the collective imagination – that precious wellspring of renewal without which no movement forward is possible. To keep alive a vision of life other than as it is being lived (8).

The value of seeking to understand theatrical wonder from a theoretical vantage point is to enhance the prospects of creating the phenomenon in practice. It is a practice that rewards curiosity, in both the artist and the spectator. The empathetic awareness of others is a necessary precedent to generosity. The value of theatrical wonder is that in appealing to our collective imagination, our faith in our own capacities is renewed and energized – and our notions of the possible are nourished and expanded. Theatre remains a laboratory of human behavior and exploration that gestures to the future with optimism and hope, and I go forward in my work as a director determined to conceive that work with

optimism and hope – optimism about the prospects of engaging theatrical wonder again and hope that the possibilities suggested by that wonder find concrete expression in human conduct.

Appendix

Production photographs from *Harry's Way*

Riverside Theatre, 1997, used with permission

Harriet (L) and Harry (M) are visited by a social worker (R).

A doctor examines Harriet.

Harriet (L) and Harry (R) encounter a probation officer.

Harry playfully tortures his brother.

Harriet in the moment after shooting Harry.

Production photographs from *Romeo and Juliet*

Photos by Luke Granfield, used with permission

Riverside Theatre Shakespeare Festival, 2002

Palestinian women in the marketplace of “Verona”

Images from the riot

Image from the riot

Juliet and the Nurse

Mercutio joins the Capulet men at the dance. (Palestinian men typically dance with each other at these events.)

Juliet with the Capulet women at the party.

Juliet meets the disguised Romeo.

Moments from the balcony scene.

Doctor Lawrence attempts to dissuade Romeo from pursuing a Capulet.

The wedding

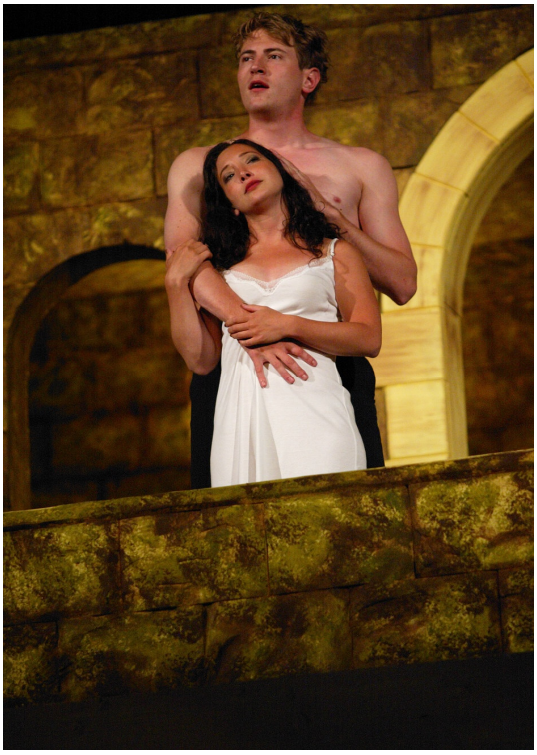
Mercutio (L) and Tybalt (C) fight while Romeo attempts to intervene.

Mercutio in his death throes with Benvolio.

Lady Capulet and the Nurse react to Tybalt's death.

Lord Capulet (L), the Prince (C), and Benvolio (R).

Juliet learns of the deaths and of Romeo's banishment.



Romeo and Juliet spend a night together but must part with the dawn.

Capulet grieves for the daughter he believes is dead.

The next dawn finds the lovers united in actual death.

Production Photographs from *The Goat, Or Who Is Sylvia?*

Riverside Theatre, 2003, used with permission

Stevie (L) listens as Martin attempts to explain his behavior.

Stevie at her most vulnerable.

Martin describes holding Sylvia's head in his hands.

Billy confronts his father in Scene Three.

Stevie returns at the end of the play with Sylvia's slaughtered carcass.

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